

Researchers investigate the impact of police stops on youth's mental health

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New research looks into the impact police stops have on the mental health of youth. Assistant professors Dylan Jackson, Chantal Fahmy and Alexander Testa in the UTSA Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice collaborated with professor Michael Vaughn in the College for Public Health and Social Justice at St. Louis University to conduct a study that reveals that youth experiencing intrusive police stops are at

risk of heightened emotional distress.

According to the study, intrusive stops were defined by frisking, harsh language, searches, racial slurs, threat of force, and use of force. The study examines the connection between features of police stops and youths' emotional distress during the stop, social stigma after the stop, and post-traumatic stress after the stop.

The researchers found that youth who were stopped more often by [police officers](#) were more likely to report emotional trauma. Their findings show that youth's perceptions of their negative encounters with officers could also be harmful to their mental health.

The data were collected between 2014-2017 from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS), a large, national study of at-risk families and their children born between 1998 and 2000. Data for this study involved 918 youth who reported being stopped by police during their lifetime.

"We found that 27% of this urban-born sample of at-risk youth reported being stopped by police by age 15" said Jackson. "While not all encounters were experienced as hostile or threatening, our results suggest that when stops were characterized by a greater number of intrusive officer behaviors, youth perceptions of heightened [social stigma](#) and experiences of post-traumatic stress were more likely to follow" he added.

Emotional distress was measured by asking youth whether they felt safe, scared or angry during the police encounter. Youth also reported feelings of stigma following the stop, for example, if they avoided people for fear of others thinking of them in a negative way, if people have used the incident to make fun of them, and if they hid the fact that they were stopped from friends and family.

To measure post-[traumatic stress](#) following the stop, youth were asked whether the situation brings back negative feelings of being stopped, whether or not images of the stop pop into their head, and whether or not they suffer from physical reactions such as sweating, trouble breathing, or having a pounding heart.

The researchers uncovered another detail overlooked by other research., They found that youth who were stopped by police officers at school reported more [emotional distress](#) and negative reactions than those who were stopped in other locations. This was especially true in the case of youth with little to no history of delinquency.

"It may be that being stopped in the [school setting](#), which is known for its structure and conventionality, is experienced as more shameful for these youth" said Jackson.

Researchers conclude that youth may benefit when social workers, school counselors and mental health providers intervene to offer care and services to help youth deal with feelings of shame and trauma after police stops. In addition, efforts to enhance police-community relations -especially police-youth relations—may help to minimize the adverse health consequences of police stops among youth.

"Ultimately, our study suggests that [police](#)-youth relations are in need of improvement, particularly in an era characterized by an upsurge in officers stationed at schools" said Fahmy.

"For example, to help alleviate some of the distress among [youth](#) who have been stopped, officers can engage in comprehensive preparatory awareness training on what the procedures are when stopping someone suspected of a crime."

More information: Dylan B. Jackson et al, Police Stops Among At-

Risk Youth: Repercussions for Mental Health, *Journal of Adolescent Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.05.027](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.05.027)

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