

Racial Disparities in Policing and their Impact on Police-Community Relations

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Negative relationships between police and communities are associated with civilian perceptions of lack of safety, low civilian trust in police, and overall negative perceptions of law enforcement, particularly for Black communities and other communities who have been historically marginalized.^{1,4} While community policing and problem-solving approaches to policing have been associated with reductions in crime, a lack of comprehensive data surrounding police-community contacts has prevented an assessment of how different policing strategies affect outcomes such as community perceptions of police, community safety and wellness, and officer safety and wellness.^{1,3,5,8}

Disparities in policing fuel ongoing negative relationships between police and communities.

- Examination of systemic racial disparities in the use of extreme force suggests that, rather than being driven primarily by actual prevalence of criminal activity, factors such as clothing (e.g., hooded sweatshirts, baggy clothing) and neighborhood perceptions (e.g., low socioeconomic status, perceived “dangerousness,” proportion of Black residents) may heighten racial disparities in shooting decisions.^{9,10}
- In the context of ongoing and compounded negative interactions (e.g., being stopped and searched), Black communities, as well as other historically marginalized communities (e.g., Indigenous communities, Hispanic/Latinx communities), may experience less trust in police and be less likely to seek assistance from police in keeping their communities safe.^{2,3,5,6,11}
- A “culture of urgency,” focus on arrest rates as outcomes, and reactive approach to policing may interfere with officers’ ability to work with communities toward community safety.^{7,8,10,12-15}

Community-based approaches to policing, within a broader procedural justice framework, have the potential to change the nature of police-community relationships.

- A procedural justice orientation to policing that emphasizes fairness, transparency, impartiality, and opportunities to be heard is closely aligned with partnership with communities, prioritization of de-escalation, accountability, and awareness of racial dynamics.^{2,3,5-10,13-15}
- Community policing approaches, which emphasize collaboration and cooperation between police and communities to address ongoing issues and reduce crime, have a stronger association with reductions in crime than strict enforcement approaches, such as “zero tolerance” or “order maintenance” policing.¹⁴
- Civilian employees of police departments could provide important perspectives to improve community-police relationships, advocate for and provide services to victims, and support de-escalation efforts.¹⁶

Potential Avenues for Addressing Gaps: A centralized requirement for systematic, standardized police data collection, funding for police-researcher partnerships, and a focus on community impact as outcomes are likely to address gaps.

- A lack of comprehensive data on police-community contacts, police training, and the impact of changes in police culture or strategies limits our knowledge of how to effectively improve police-community relationships.^{1,3,9,10,13} A centralized requirement for the systematic, standardized collection of these data should be implemented.
- Federal funding for police-research partnerships would provide critical and valuable resources to better understand how implementing current recommendations for community-oriented policing would impact racial disparities in policing, community perceptions of police, and officer and civilian safety.^{7,8,13,14,17}

Bolstering the capacity of organizations and offices, such as the Department of Justice’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services and the Bureau of Justice Statistics could support translation of research findings into practical guidelines for police departments.^{8,18}

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