

# Early police stops had long-term consequences for Seattle's Black youth, UW research shows

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Annie McGlynn-Wright could find no shortage of painful examples of police stopping Black youth when she was working through her University of Washington research — but she wanted to learn more about what happened after those stops, and how those early-in-life experiences, depending on race, might shape the rest of a child's life.

The results of the UW study, which was published in late October, were straightforward: Police encounters during childhood increase the risk of arrests in young adulthood for Black students, but not white students.

The study, launched nearly 20 years ago, comes in the midst of a national racial-justice reckoning and after months of protests after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. In Seattle, demonstrations for Black lives continue on Capitol Hill and in downtown nearly every day.

The study “just kind of reinforces much of what we’ve been focused on in the last eight months after the tragic death of George Floyd,” said Kevin Haggerty, a professor in UW’s School of Social Work and a co-author of the research. “And it really brings that to light in a very real way.”

While past research on race and policing has shown evidence Black Americans experience more frequent police stops and are more likely to have a negative experience during those stops, UW researchers noticed there wasn’t as much information about the long-term consequences of those early experiences with law enforcement, said McGlynn-Wright, a postdoctoral fellow at Tulane University who led the study while pursuing her doctorate at UW.

“There was some sense that early contacts might matter ... but (no studies) that we were aware of how that might be different by race,” McGlynn-Wright said.

The study tracked 331 Black and white Seattle Public Schools (SPS) students who were eighth-graders at 18 different schools in 2001 and 2002. Researchers interviewed students and parents when the kids were about 13 years old, surveyed them several times over the years, then interviewed them again when they were 20.

The UW team wanted to examine what happens during the first few police stops of a young person’s life, and how — depending on race — they might affect how that person is treated when they transition into young adulthood.

The study found that while there were no differences in illegal behavior between Black and white students in 8th grade, 37% of Black teens said they had had some sort of contact with police, compared to 22% of white teens. And by the time the students had turned 20, 53% of white participants reported engaging in some level of criminal behavior, compared to 32% of Black participants.

While white participants were more likely to report illegal drug use, there weren't any significant differences by race for violent or property crimes, the study showed.

One of the main and most alarming take-aways, McGlynn-Wright said, was that despite the differences in illegal behavior during young adulthood, Black students who had contact with police by eighth grade were 11 times more likely than their white counterparts to be arrested by the time they were 20 years old.

"Even when police act politely, highly discretionary stops send messages about assumed criminality and citizenship," the study said. "Racially biased investigatory stops tell a driver that they look like a criminal and people like them are subject to arbitrary control befitting their subordinate status."

The study also looked at the introduction of resource officers in schools, which has increased opportunities for contact between police and children and, according to the study, is "frequently attributed to a rise in public concern about school violence."

"Limiting the contact police have with young people is a really important first step," McGlynn-Wright said.

In Seattle, the School Board voted in June to [indefinitely suspend a partnership between the school district and the Seattle Police Department](#) that stationed five armed police officers at public schools. The unanimous vote came during the height of the city's racial-justice protests and as part of a broader initiative to improve school climate for Black students, board members said.

While McGlynn-Wright acknowledged SPS resource officers could be seen as counselor or mentor figures for students, she added that "there's a legally ambiguous area that they enter into where it's not entirely clear if they're acting as a school personnel or a police officer."

"And I do think there's a danger in that legally ambiguous space," she said. "I just haven't seen the evidence that suggests there's a great deal of benefit to students."

The study's results reemphasize the importance of focusing police officers' attention on the quality of their interactions with young people, Haggerty added.

"It may be that law-enforcement personnel or public-safety personnel are not the people who should be doing counseling in schools," he said. "There are other folks who have that role."

Seattle police Chief Adrian Diaz said Wednesday the Police Department didn't have a formal school-resource officer program in 2001 or 2002, when the survey began. The partnership between the department and SPS began in 2008. (The research, while studying Seattle students, is not specifically about stops or contact with the Seattle Police Department.)

"All the programs we've built since then have focused on making sure we're not contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline. ... We're not part of that disciplinary process," Diaz said.

He added that officers, whose goal is to act as role models to students, were not making arrests in schools and have done "hundreds of thousands of referrals into social services." The Police Department is hoping to revisit discussions with SPS about the partnership next school year, he said.

There's still a lot that researchers don't know about how and why police stops have much longer-term consequences for Black youth. And while the report didn't specifically examine the reasoning behind the disparities, the authors' research points to the effects of "stereotypes of Black criminality," McGlynn-Wright said.

"Police start to respond to them more as if they're criminals," she said. "And for white kids it's like, 'Oh, the kid just did something wrong.'"

She also noted that the bulk of the UW research was conducted before [the Seattle Police Department was issued a court-ordered consent decree in 2012](#), when the department was asked to address excessive use of force by officers.

"If the consent decree had a positive effect on racial disparities and policing, we might expect to see something different post-consent decree," she said.

One of the first steps in tackling the disparities, Haggerty said, is to focus on sending more resources to Seattle's Black community and police training — specifically on the quality of stops. Better training could help officers "understand the potential impact of that stop," he said.

These actions are on the city's radar. On Tuesday, Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan, after months of deliberation with the City Council, [signed the city's 2021 budget into law](#), a long process that ended with approval to allow the Police Department and Fire Department to hire more social workers and mental-health specialists and direct tens of millions of dollars toward programs and projects meant to address racial inequities.

"We have to be really thoughtful about how Black young children are being contacted by the police" Haggerty added, "and how that creates a cascading effect on young adulthood."

*Seattle Times* staff reporters *Dahlia Bazzaz* and *Hannah Furfaro* contributed to this story.