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Racial Disparity in Police Contacts

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Abstract

Criminologists agree the race disparity in arrests cannot be fully explained by differences in criminal behavior. We examine social environment factors that may lead to racial differences in police contact in early adolescence, including family, peers, school, and community. Data are from 331 8th-grade students. Blacks were almost twice as likely as Whites to report a police contact. Blacks reported more property crime but not more violent crime than Whites. Police contacts were increased by having a parent who had been arrested, a sibling involved in criminal activity, higher observed reward for negative behavior, having school disciplinary actions, and knowing adults who engaged in substance abuse or criminal behavior. Race differences in police contacts were partially attributable to more school discipline.

Keywords

Race disparity; Police contacts; Environment

Introduction

For more than 30 years, criminologists have studied racial differences in criminal justice experiences. Studies have considered both juvenile and adult patterns of arrest (Piliavin & Briar, 1964), conviction (Adler, 2006; Harmon, 2004), and sentencing (Kleck, 1981). These studies have traced individuals in the criminal (Engen, Gainey, Crutchfield, & Weis, 2003) and juvenile justice systems (Bridges & Steen, 1998), and a number of studies have considered correlates of aggregate race differences in criminal justice processing

(Blumstein, 1982; Bridges & Crutchfield, 1988). Results vary about how much racial disparity exists and about the proportion of observed differences that can be attributed to legally relevant variables, (e.g., criminal involvement, offense seriousness, and offenders' criminal histories). Though criminologists do not agree on the proportion of racial differences in criminal justice processing that can be explained by legal differences, they do concur that not all of the observable disparity can be explained by legally relevant race differences (Blumstein, 1982; Crutchfield, Bridges, & Pitchford, 1994; Crutchfield, Fernandes, & Martinez, 2010; Langan, 1985). What then explains why people of color have more contacts with police, have higher arrest and conviction rates, and are more likely to spend time in prison?

The popular answer is discrimination on the part of police, prosecutors, and judges. Unfortunately, we cannot directly assess with standard quantitative analytic methods either specific acts of discrimination nor racist sentiments on the part of criminal justice officials while performing their duties. Not surprisingly, officials generally do not reveal on questionnaires or in interviews that they are prejudiced. Laboratory research on implicit bias (Greenwald, Oakes, & Hoffman, 2003; Joy-Gaba & Nosek, 2010) has made important strides measuring unconscious reactions to race by studying physiological changes produced by controlled stimuli, but this methodology does not apply well to field studies to definitively draw conclusions about discriminatory attitudes or behaviors in criminal justice settings. Qualitative studies have reported subtle forms of racial biases on the part of court actors (Bridges & Steen, 1998; Harris, 2009). So discrimination remains a viable interpretation of legally unexplained racial differences in criminal justice decisions; but one difficult to measure in large field studies.

Another possible explanation is seemingly racially neutral criminal justice practices, such as bail standards that emphasize the importance of defendant characteristics, disadvantage some segments of the population (e.g., residential stability disadvantaging migrant workers). Here we focus on racial differences in police contacts for juveniles. Obviously one reason that young people come into contact with police is delinquency. We address two questions: first, are there racial differences in police contacts which are not explained by criminal involvement, and second, are there features of social life that help to explain these differences. Differential contacts with the police are important because they potentially put young people who have these experiences at risk in other aspects of their lives. We more fully discuss these risks below.

Garland (2001, p. 114) argues that in the wake of the upheaval, riots, and criticisms in the 1960s and 1970s, police strove to become more professional and used more technology, and moved away from close community contact. Because that approach did not produce reductions in crime, police departments changed their strategies, leading to widespread adoption of community policing practices in the last decades of the 20th century. The earlier period, where professionalization was stressed, led to poor interaction with the populace, especially poor and minority communities. The newer community policing approach brings officers into more daily contact with the public. This means that young people are now more likely to encounter police in a broad array of their social environments, including in their neighborhoods and schools.

If the social environments of young people of color and White juveniles differ, the former may be at greater risk of having contacts with police independent of their involvement in delinquency. If the former are more likely to live, go to school, and work where there is greater police presence or where there is more surveillance, they may be more likely to come to the attention of the criminal justice system. For instance, Krivo and Peterson (1996) report that racial residential segregation consigns African Americans to neighborhoods

where they are more likely to experience victimization. To the extent that police departments focus patrols where there is more crime (Bayley, 2008; Brunson & Weitzer, 2009), or where police perceive there to be more crime (Beckett, Nyrop, & Pflingst, 2006), African Americans are at greater risk of encounters with police. In this paper we will examine several important “environments” to assess the extent to which, in the face of community policing, they increase the likelihood that young African Americans will be more likely to have police contacts than Whites above and beyond what would be expected by observable differences in delinquency.

Racial differences in criminal justice processing go to the heart of our collective notions of fairness and justice. When the questions are about juveniles they take on added importance. Labeling theorists, more than 3 decades ago (Becker, 1963; Schur, 1969) convinced us, and continue to affirm (Bernburg, Krohn, & Rivera, 2006; Tapia, 2011) the formative influence of interactions with agents of social control. Braithwaite (1989), in making the case for reintegrative shaming, criticized normal justice procedures for engaging in “shaming” that is disintegrative (stigmatization). Here we take their invocations to heart in our effort to study social environment factors that contribute to race differences in police contacts. When teens have adverse interactions with police, the consequences can be longer lasting than for adults (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). If they are not treated fairly, or if they perceive that they are not treated fairly, their future behavior and interactions with law enforcement might be negatively affected. The question of the propriety of the behavior of police and other justice actors is also important to communities of color. When communities observe differences that cannot be explained, it potentially gives credence to an injustice narrative that harms community-police relations. So, as Garland (2001) described, officers engaging in community policing seek to have more interactions with citizens, but this presents risk for perceptions of police, and for the youths themselves who interact with officers. Here we do not test Garland’s assertion that community policing leads to more public/police interaction. He more than adequately makes the case, as does the continuing existence of the Federal COPS Office in the Justice Department, whose website states their mission as to “advance the practice of community policing in America’s state, local and tribal law enforcement agencies” (<http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/>). Our purpose here is to examine the extent to which, in the context of contemporary policing, there are racial disparities in juveniles’ contacts with police that cannot be accounted for by differential delinquency involvement. And, if there are unaccounted for disparities, how do the social environments experienced by juveniles explain them?

Here we are interested not in arrest or subsequent decision points in the juvenile justice system, but in contact with police. Of course, contact is a necessary condition for arrest, but we should no more presume that the former has only benign effects on children, than we should assume that all contacts with police are negative. While some effects of contacts appear immediately (e.g., arrest and its aftermath), others may show up later, some much later. The nature and consequences of such effects is an empirical question that gains importance if there are racial differences in likelihood that juveniles have contact with officers. Skogan (2006) reported that while negative interactions between citizens and police have the predictable effect of increasing hostile feelings and cynicism, positive interactions do not help, they have no substantial effect at all. One wonders if such patterns are exacerbated in minority communities where predominantly negative narratives about police-minority community relations are present.

Racial Disparities in Crime and Criminal Justice

We are not the first to analyze social environments and police contacts. Stewart and colleagues (2009) studied neighborhood context and Black youths’ perceptions of police treatment. The environment did matter. Black youths were more likely to have adverse

interactions with police when they were in White neighborhoods, especially those with growing Black populations. Similar patterns were uncovered by Brunson and Weitzer (2009) in a qualitative study of both Black and White juveniles in low-income communities. Tapia (2010) found that both race and social class were significant predictors of juvenile arrests, but interestingly, being “out of place,” a minority person in a non-minority neighborhood, resulted in stronger effects for higher income Blacks than for those of lower SES. Here we add to this line of research by examining the experiences of young Black and White juveniles in two important social environments, as well as individual and family characteristics, while accounting for self-reported level of involvement in delinquency.

Offenders, including juveniles, are arrested because they do something wrong. Perhaps people have contact with police because of their suspicious behavior or because they are in places where they probably should not be. Though some people concur with such statements (Wilbanks, 1987), research results have long shown that it is not so simple. For nearly 40 years, criminologists have periodically explored the factors which lead police to make an arrest once they have made contact with a suspect. Piliavan and Briar (1964) stressed the importance of suspects’ demeanor. Black and Reis (1970) found that the seriousness of offense and the wishes of victims (when present) influence police the most in their decisions to make an arrest. Recently, Beckett and her colleagues (2006) reported that police drug enforcement practices affect who is arrested more than behavior patterns of users and sellers. Other researchers have also reported that suspects’ demeanor and non-legal factors such as race, social class, and gender affect police decision making when they encounter citizens (Dai & Nation, 2009). And, Brunson and Weitzer (2011) have documented that citizens, particularly in inner-city neighborhoods, try to prepare their children for “unwelcome” contact with police because of the potential for escalation during encounters.

Generally, researchers have found that not all of the observed racial differences in police contact, arrest, or incarceration can be explained by patterns of criminal behavior. Three coordinated studies, in Denver, Rochester, and Seattle, used existing longitudinal datasets to examine the extent to which arrest and charging decisions could be accounted for by self-reported involvement in delinquency (Huizinga et al., 2007). While there were modest differences across the sites, the investigators all found that the racial differences in arrest were attenuated by differences in self-reported offending, but the race differences in police contacts remained statistically significant and substantial. These researchers, like others who have studied racial disparities, acknowledge that discrimination may be a part of the explanation of higher arrest and charging of Black youth, but they cannot dismiss other unmeasured reasons for the unexplained race differences. By examining critical environments that may lead to more police contact for Black juveniles beyond what would be expected by differences in offending behavior, we can specify important, previously unmeasured forces affecting racial differences. The two environments that we focus on are school and community, while also considering individual, familial, and peer influences.

Race and Environment

When discussing discrimination, the general public and many criminal and juvenile justice practitioners mean that criminal justice agents make racially prejudiced decisions to arrest, prosecute, or to sentence. It is possible, even likely, that this happens sometimes. But this alone is too limited of a conception of how race can negatively affect outcomes. In the United States, African Americans are at greater risk of victimization, school dropout, unemployment, and a host of other problems, in part, because they live in racially segregated communities (Massey, 1990; Peterson & Krivo, 1999, 2010; Williams & Collins, 2001). Racial residential segregation is a direct result of discriminatory practices in real estate markets and in mortgage lending (Charles, 2003; Munnell, Tootell, Browne, & McEneaney, 1996; Oliver & Shapiro, 1995; Ross & Yinger, 2002). The consequences of segregated

communities are examples of institutionalized racism, not just individual prejudice. The environments in which African Americans live are the consequences of continuing racialized patterns of social life (Massey & Denton, 1993; Peterson & Krivo, 2010).

Peterson and Krivo (2010) advance what they call “a structural race perspective” to explain how stratification affects those living in Black and Latino neighborhoods. They write: “... the internal structural conditions of neighborhoods and the circumstances of surrounding areas are fundamentally racialized in ways that specifically reinforce and maintain superiority in the local contexts of Whites, and widespread deprivation in the contexts of African Americans, Latinos, and sometimes others” (Peterson & Krivo, 2010, p. 115). In the current analyses we integrate a basic tenant of labeling theory, that particular social statuses (such as race), help to determine who is subjected to social control, with the structural race perspective of Peterson and Krivo, to add a micro-level component that allows us to specify elements of environments that may cause the negative outcomes from contemporary policing practices written about by Garland (2001). And these negative outcomes add to the structured inequality faced by people of color.

We expect that characteristics of juveniles will in part explain variation in their contacts with police. Those engaging in delinquency, reasonably, will have more police contact, but several other individual-level patterns may also increase the probability of contact. While these are not legally relevant factors that can be said to “account” for observed racial differences in police interactions, familial and peer characteristics may lead to differential contact. We discuss our reasons for these predictions below. We also expect that two particular environments, school and community, are especially important for explaining racial differences in police contacts. Important racial differences in these environments make it more likely that African Americans will experience more police contacts than would be expected by any observably higher involvement in self-reported delinquent behavior. Police presence in schools, particularly in schools in “trouble areas,” and officer engagement in “problem communities” increase the likelihood of having contact with officers.

Clearly, these two environments, schools and communities, are neither mutually exclusive nor independent of one another or from familial or peer group characteristics. Several careful qualitative studies demonstrate this in examinations of school violence. Brunson and Miller (2009) found that violence in school is linked to the disadvantage and violence that occurs in communities where students live. Mateu-Gelabert (2000) used ethnography to study the bi-directionality of school and neighborhood violence. And in a subsequent study he reports that schools that foster commitment to education can counter the negative effects of street codes that students are exposed to in their home communities (Mateu-Gelabert & Lune, 2007). Sullivan (2002) argues that to understand school violence, the individual, school, and community factors must be addressed within a nested conceptualization. Hagan, Hirschfield, & Shedd (2002) demonstrated that there are links between neighborhoods and schools where serious violence has occurred. Also, families select neighborhoods based on multiple factors, including cost, and in doing so make choices about schools and the peers to which their children will be exposed. And Hellman and Beaton (1986) report that school violence in middle school is not linked to communities, but violence in high schools is.

Why do we predict that family factors will influence police contacts independent of self-reported delinquency? Family factors, including parental monitoring, parent-child attachment, and the number of siblings influence children’s behavior and experiences. We have included both problematic (risk) and non-problematic (protective) family functioning as potential contributors to differential contacts with police. If a household has an abusive or alcoholic parent, the familial interaction and the child are affected, and such factors may

especially increase the likelihood that members of the family, including children, will come to the attention of authorities.

How else might “bad families” lead to more police contacts? We can begin to answer this question by turning to old-school (and now very much discredited as social science) criminology, where the Jukes and the Kallikaks, two 19th-century families, were cited in very early works about the intergenerational transmission of criminal behavior (Sutherland, 1924). Presumably, local authorities of that day would have looked at the younger members of the Juke and Kallikak clans when there was trouble about because they were so frequently involved in trouble. A more compelling argument, though, for how families might increase police contacts, independent of the behavior of children, is provided by Anderson (1999). Members of “street families,” adhering to the “code of the street,” will get in trouble with the law (Anderson, 1999). In this era of community policing, it is likely that effective officers will have knowledge of who are in such families. In these situations, they may be more likely to seek out members of those families for questioning, just as 19th-century constables looked to the Jukes and the Kallikaks when something bad happened. Families will not only affect the behavior of juveniles, but we predict that, independent of that behavior, children from “problem families” will get more police attention, warranted or not.

Family influences might be considered those most proximal to the teen, whereas peer influences are only slightly less so. Associating with deviant peers is one of the primary risk factors for engaging in problem behavior (Brody et al., 2001), but may also lead more directly to contact with law enforcement. As might be the case with family members, peers may also have had previous contact with law enforcement. Teens who associate with other teens who engage in illegal activity are more likely to experience a police contact regardless of their own illegal activity.

No institution other than the family so dominates children’s lives as their school. A major portion of their waking hours are spent there and, at least for those who do homework, school affects even the time not spent there. School also heavily influences young people’s behavior. Those who are educationally successful are more likely to develop attachments to school and have positive feelings towards their teachers, and as a result are less likely to be delinquent (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Newcomb et al., 2002). School environments affect children’s social lives in positive directions through extracurricular activities, friendships, and budding love lives; and in negative directions through rivalries, bullies, and gangs. Peer relations in school are important determinants of young people’s social status (Corsaro & Eder, 1990). Some students go to schools that must be equipped with metal detectors, others do not. Some schools have guards or police on hand while others have the luxury of not worrying so much about security. It is likely that these and other environmental differences will affect both delinquency and police contact. And because of the racial residential distribution of the American population, school environments vary by race.

School environments are likely to affect the probability that a student will have police contact, above what might be expected based on behavior, in two ways: directly in school and indirectly in the community. First, if there is a police presence in the schools, officers may become involved in school discipline issues that would not have provoked a police response in the community. During the period when the data that we are using was collected, all Seattle middle schools had officers assigned to them.¹ Typically, one officer was assigned to two or three schools. The actual police presence in schools depended on the perceived need. Likely those schools with more discipline problems or those with more “at-

¹The agreement between the Seattle Public Schools and the Seattle Police Department was described to the authors by an official of the school system and was confirmed by a representative of the Seattle Police Department.

risk” students had more actual ‘officer present’ times. The officers had some discretion in how they allocated their time. It is easy to imagine that schools may have used the officers in ‘get tough’ discipline strategies, but Seattle Police Department policy was that they not be involved in standard, noncriminal problems. But readers should recognize that officers may have intervened in the belief that early intervention would deter wayward children from a life of crime. This is, of course, the philosophy of the early juvenile courts (Platt, 1969).

A second means by which school environments might produce racial disparities in police contacts is school discipline. Kirk (2008) reports there are common (school and community) social control linkages between school suspension and juvenile arrest. And other researchers report that African American students are more likely to be suspended or expelled from school (Eitle & Eitle, 2004; Gordon, Piana, & Keleher, 2000; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Seattle Public Schools, like other districts, has a history of racial disparity in school discipline, including suspensions (Wright, 2005), and in a recent national study, the U.S. Department of Education found that African American and Latino students are more likely to receive harsher punishments (<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/03/06/148032586/report-minority-students-receive-harsher-punishments>). So if students are suspended, they may end up being on the street during school hours where they could potentially be viewed with suspicion.

Racial residential segregation means that the neighborhoods from which young White and Black people come will be different in many important respects. It is well established that race and social disadvantage of neighborhoods—characterized by poverty, unemployment, welfare dependency, etc.—are related (de Bodman & Bennett, 2011; Jargowsky, 1996; Massey, 1990). Black children live in neighborhoods with more negative social and economic influences (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; McLoyd, 1990). They are likely to be exposed to criminogenic forces, are more likely to be victims of crime, and more frequently live where there is greater fear of crime (Elliott, 1994; Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2001; Peterson & Krivo, 2010; Shihadeh & Flynn, 1996; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). Consequently, there will be a greater police presence in the neighborhood environments of Black juveniles, as well as in their school environments.

The neighborhood or community environment can affect police contacts in two ways as well. As the criminological literature has long documented, there are important social forces that lead to higher levels of delinquency among some segments of the population (Bursik & Grasmick, 1993; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997; Shaw & McKay, 1942), but here we are interested in forces that will increase the probability of police contacts beyond those produced by criminal involvement. Because police know which neighborhoods have higher crime rates, enforcement is concentrated there, increasing the odds that juveniles will experience police contact.

A second means by which juveniles may be put at risk of involvement with the police in their community (Elliott, 1994) is by exposure to “risk-producing elements,” specific people who officers may watch out for. Families who embrace the “code of the street” (Anderson, 1999; Jones, 2010; Stewart & Simons, 2010) are not just known by members of the community, but also by law enforcement. Juveniles who spend time with carriers of the code of the street or who spend time where such people frequent will have more opportunities to encounter police (“street” families are defined earlier in this paper).

Other researchers (mentioned above) have studied social environments and contact with justice system actors. What this study uniquely contributes is the opportunity to study the impact of multiple social environments, here measured with considerable detail, on racial differences in police contact, net of Black and White differences in self-reported

delinquency. The current study complements qualitative research on school violence and extends quantitative examinations of peers, neighborhoods, and police contacts by adding simultaneous consideration of families and schools.

Method

Sample

Parents of eighth-grade students during the 2001—2002 school year in the Seattle school district received a letter describing the study, and the parents were contacted by phone. Families were included if the teen and one or both parents consented to participate. Eligibility included self-identifying as African American or European American, speaking English as their primary language, and planning to live in the area for at least 6 months. Recruitment stopped when an adequate number of African American and European American males and females had agreed to participate. Forty-six percent of families who received letters consented (55% of African Americans and 40% of European Americans). The parents who refused were more likely to be European American, married, and had a higher education on average than those who consented. Other ethnic groups were not recruited.

The sample was stratified by teen race and gender. There were significant differences by race in several demographic variables. European Americans reported higher per capita income and parental education, and African Americans reported higher prevalence of single parenthood (Table 1). Some teens in each race group self-identified as mixed race (19.6% African American, 12.5% European American), but were included in these analyses. Most primary caregivers were female (> 80%), with 71.6% being the adolescent's biological mother. Caregiver gender and relationship were similar across race with one exception: more African American youth had another female caregiver (e.g., grandmother, aunt) as a primary caregiver than did European American youth [$\chi^2(1) = 13.95, p < .001$].

Data collectors went to the families' homes. Teens and their parents completed self-administered questionnaires in their homes using laptop computers while the data collector was present. This ensured that parents did not monitor their teens' responses. Prior to parent/teen interaction tasks, a trained research assistant set up video equipment, provided oral and written standardized instructions to each family, then left the room while the family completed the task. Upon completion of a warm-up task, the primary caregiver and the teen completed two structured interaction tasks: (a) a 10-minute problem-solving interaction and (b) a 5-minute recognition task during which the parent and child complimented one another. Family members received \$15 each time they completed questionnaires. The family received \$50, and each participant (one teen and one or two parents) received \$15 each for completing observational measures.

Measures

Police contact was collected on the teen surveys. Contact was coded as having occurred if the teen responded affirmatively to any of the following questions. Have you ever (a) been picked up or stopped by the police, but not arrested; (b) been in trouble with the police for something you did; (c) been arrested by the police; (d) spent time in a juvenile detention center for something you did wrong? Of the 331 eighth graders in the sample, 70% had no contact with police. Ninety-nine (30%) had some contact with police, 76 (23%) had "only contact" but were not arrested, 23 (7%) had been arrested, and 6 (less than 2%) had been placed in detention. No questions were asked about where contacts took place or any specific information about the context of the actual police contacts.

Teen self-report of criminal activity was measured separately for property and violent crimes. Each was computed as the mean of two items measured on a 5-point scale of frequency in the past 30 days (0 = never, 1 = 1 to 2 times, 2 = 3 to 5 times, 3 = 6 to 10 times, and 4 = more than 10 times). Property crime includes arson and theft. Violent crime includes carrying a gun to school and hitting someone with the intent to hurt them.

Race was based on parents' reports of their child's race on school enrollment forms (0 = White, 1 = Black). *Gender* was reported by teens on the survey (0 = male, 1 = female). *Age* was measured in years calculated from birthdates reported on the survey and the date the survey was completed. *Household per capita income* was calculated from parent's endorsement of 1 of 11 categories for annual household income (before taxes). We assigned the midpoint of the range and then divided by the number of people in the household as reported by parents on the survey. *Single-parent status* was reported on the parent survey (0 = partnered, 1 = no spouse or partner).

Parent juvenile delinquency was an index based on parent retrospect accounts of their own teen years, "Before you turned 18 did you" Response options were 0 = No, 1 = Yes. The five items were (a) skip school, (b) get drunk, (c) run away from home overnight, (d) use a weapon in a fight, and (e) often start physical fights. *Sibling criminal activity* was measured with a single item, "In the past year, have any of your brothers or sisters done anything that could have gotten them in trouble with the police (like stealing, selling drugs, vandalism, etc.)" 0 = No, 1 = Yes.

Family conflict was computed as the average of 13 items ($\alpha = .84$) taken from the Strauss Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus, 1990). Response options for eight items were a Likert-type scale from 1 to 7. One item ranged from 1 to 4, and four items were dichotomous. The item scores were standardized (mean = 0, SD = 1) and then averaged. Items included "Family members often criticize each other," and "In the past month, how often did you yell, insult, or swear at your teen when the two of you have disagreed about something?"

Observed rewards for positive or negative behavior were computed as composites of item responses from trained raters reviewing videotapes of parent-teen interactions. Variables were measured using the Social Development Model-Observational Coding System (Spagnolo et al., 2002). Eighteen raters (5 men, 13 women; 28% African American, 66% European American, 6% Hispanic) completed an average of 93 hours of training. Ratings were made using 5-point Likert-type scales (Not at All, A Little, Sometimes, Often, Very Often). Twenty percent of the videotapes were double rated to check inter-rater reliability. Inter-rater agreement was high ($M = 89\%$) (Lindahl, 2001).

Rewards for positive behavior was computed as the mean of seven items, including "Caregiver was warm and encouraging of teen's opinions" and "Caregiver reinforced or rewarded teen's prosocial behavior or attitudes."

Rewards for negative behavior was computed as the mean of four items, including "Caregiver failed to respond to teen's negative or antisocial behavior or attitude" and "Caregiver reinforced or rewarded negative behavior or attitudes."

Delinquent peers was measured with teen report. The teens were asked to name their three best (or closest) friends (first names or initials only), and were then asked a series of questions about each of those friends, including having done anything in the last year that could have gotten them in trouble with the police. A dichotomous score was created, with 1 indicating at least one of the friends had engaged in the behavior.

Academic success/grades were based on reports from teens: “Putting them all together, what were your grades like last year?” Responses ranged from 1 = very poor to 6 = very good. *School discipline* was computed as the average of four standardized items from the teen survey, including “In the past year, how often have you been sent out of the classroom for doing something wrong?” (alpha = .88). These items did not ask about police involvement in school discipline, although it is possible that some incidences of school discipline may have led to police contact.

Community/neighborhood resources and cohesion was measured using 10 items from the parent survey. Item responses were from 1 to 5, indicating how accurate the description or how frequent the activity.² High scores indicate positive neighborhoods. Items include “How often do your neighbors visit each other’s homes” and descriptors such as “nice parks and playgrounds” and “crime” (alpha = .74). *Neighborhood environment* was assessed using the average of nine items from the teen survey. All items were measured on a 4-point scale (YES, yes, no, NO), coded so high scores indicate safer, less deviant neighborhoods. Items included “If a kid carried a handgun in your neighborhood, would he or she get caught by the police?” and “Do you feel safe in your neighborhood?” (alpha = .79). *Teen report of deviant adult network* was computed as the mean of four items (alpha = .86) measured on a 5-point scale. The items were, “About how many adults (over 21) do you know personally who have ... in the past year?” The deviant behaviors were: used marijuana, crack, cocaine, or other drugs; sold or dealt drugs; gotten drunk or high; and done other things that could get them in trouble with the police, like stealing, selling stolen goods, mugging, assaulting others, etc.

Analysis

Preliminary analyses included chi square and t-tests to examine simple race differences in police contacts, and the 18 predictors from six domains (self-reported crime, demographics, family, peer, school, and community). Logistic regression analyses were conducted to determine the unique contribution of predictors to the probability of reporting a police contact at any time before the eighth-grade survey was conducted. Predictors were entered in blocks to reduce the number of separate models to be tested and to examine the effects of predictors within a domain simultaneously. Seven models were tested (see Table 2) in a hierarchical fashion. The order in which we added predictors was based on our specific questions. First we wanted to know if there were race differences in the likelihood of police contacts after controlling for criminal involvement based on self-report. We added demographic variables in the next step because they were least likely to be influenced by having had a police contact and were therefore most exogenous to the outcome. The rest of the predictors were added starting with the environments most proximal to the individual and working out to the least proximal. Teens originate and live their lives in families first, then eventually have some choice about their peers. Schools and communities/neighborhoods are typically not directly chosen by teens, but are to some extent chosen by their parents. Step 1 included the teen’s self-report of criminal activity (property and violent crimes separately), as well as race predicting police contacts. Step 2 included self-reported criminal activity, race, and demographic variables (gender, age, per capita income, and single-parent household). In order to determine if variability in other domains accounts for race differences, predictors were added in successive steps in this order: parent and sibling criminal activity, family interactions, delinquent peers, school/grades, and community context.

²We gathered census data and appended tract data to each case in order to further examine neighborhood demographic, social, and economic characteristics. We did not find that these variables added significantly to our explanations when they were included with neighborhood assessments from the interviews. We suspect that, because of the sampling strategy which was designed to maximize the inclusion of at-risk juveniles, the normal distribution of these factors across Seattle’s 123 census tracts was truncated.

Although it is not possible to calculate a true R^2 for logistic regression models, a measure of the variance explained by the model can be calculated using the likelihood-ratio index (pseudo R^2), comparing the log likelihood of the intercept-only model to that of the model including predictors and then adjusting for the number of predictors in the model. To examine whether predictors of police contacts were different for African American and European American teens, we tested the interactions of each predictor by race in separate models. The clustering of families within schools was addressed using SAS GENMOD (Liang & Zeger, 1986; SAS Institute, 2002). Missing data were imputed (Schafer & Graham, 2002). Missing data ranged from 0% to 4% across variables, with slightly less than 19% missing across variables. Forty imputations were calculated and appropriate standard errors were computed using MIANALYZE (SAS Institute, 2002). Models reported in Table 2 used multiple imputations. However, because adjusted pseudo R^2 is only an approximation of variance explained by the model and has not been validated for estimation across multiple imputed datasets, pseudo R^2 was calculated using only those participants with complete data.

Results

Means and standard deviations are presented by race and for the total sample in Table 1. African American teens are almost twice as likely as Whites to report having had a police contact (40% vs. 21%, $X^2 = 13.41$, $p = .0003$). Significant race differences were evident for 10 of the 18 predictors. African Americans reported more property crime ($t = 5.26$, $p = .02$), but not more violent crime than White teens. As reported above, African American families had lower income and were more likely to have single parents than White families. No race differences were apparent in parent-reported juvenile delinquency. African American teens were no more or less likely to report sibling criminal behavior than Whites. Family conflict was higher ($t = 16.37$, $p < .0001$), and observed rewards for positive behavior were lower ($t = 19.54$, $p < .0001$) among Blacks than Whites. No race differences were evident for rewards for negative/problem behavior. Blacks in the sample had fewer delinquent peers than Whites (11% vs. 19%, $X^2 = 13.41$, $p = 3.90$, $p = .05$). African Americans reported lower grades and more school disciplinary events ($t = 32.85$, $p < .0001$; $t = 41.37$, $p < .0001$) than White teens. Although parent reports of neighborhood resources and cohesion were not different, African American teens did report less positive neighborhoods than Whites ($t = 6.67$, $p = .01$), and reported more adults in their network with recent deviant behavior ($t = 28.88$, $p < .001$).

Odds ratios are presented in Table 2. Self-reported property crime and violent criminal activity did significantly increase the probability of ever having a police contact in Step 1 (OR = 2.70, 2.14 respectively). After controlling for self-reported criminal activity and race in Step 2, Black teens were more than twice as likely to have a police contact as White teens. Girls were half as likely to report a police contact as boys (OR = .54).

In Step 3, parent juvenile delinquency increased police contacts by about a third (OR = 1.34), but sibling criminal activity increased the likelihood of police contact by over 4 times (OR = 4.22). Race differences were significant after controlling for family criminal activity. In Step 4, higher levels of observed parent rewards for negative behavior were significantly associated with police contacts (OR = 2.72), while family conflict and observed parent rewards for positive behavior were not. In this step, self-reported criminal activity was not significantly predictive; however, race differences were. In Step 5, associating with at least one close friend who broke the law more than doubled the risk of police contact (OR = 2.58), and this effect was statistically significant before school and broader environmental factors were included.

School factors were added in Step 6. Teen reports of school disciplinary contacts significantly increased the likelihood of police contacts (OR = 2.18), but grades did not. In this step, race differences were not significant. In the last model (Step 7), community contextual measures were added. Teen and parent reports of neighborhood quality and cohesion were not related to police contacts. However, teen reports of knowing adults who drank, got high, or committed crimes in the past 12 months were significant. Knowing adults who exhibit these deviant behaviors significantly increased the likelihood of police contacts (OR = 1.65).

Pseudo R^2 statistics for these models should be interpreted with some caution. There are no statistical tests for the incremental change or differences between nested models. Furthermore, they have been calculated without addressing missing data and are therefore based on subsamples of the original 331. Adjusted pseudo R^2 increases from 3% to 11% with the addition of predictors from each domain. The last model, including 18 predictors, explains just 41% of the variability in the risk of a police contact.

Tests of interactions between race and each predictor separately produced two statistically significant interactions: neighborhood quality ($p = .04$) and academic performance ($p = .04$). More cohesive, safe, resourced neighborhoods significantly reduced the probability of police contact for Blacks ($p = .04$), but not for Whites ($p = .39$). Higher grades reduced the probability of police contact for Whites ($p = .03$), but not for Blacks ($p = .43$).

Discussion

We examined several social environments that influence the likelihood of police contact, although not all of them accounted for racial disparities. Interestingly, low income and single-parent household were not significant predictors. But we did find that family patterns contributed strongly to police contacts. Having parents who have a history of involvement in juvenile crime increased the odds of police contact by about one third. Parents who were delinquent in their youth are perhaps more tolerant of similar behavior in their children and view this behavior as just normal teenage activity that their children will grow out of. Youth with a sibling involved in criminal activity were also more likely to have police contact. We suspect this may be in part due to police knowing the older siblings and being aware of the household. We did not examine if these families are, in the words of Anderson (1999), “street families,” if the police had such a conception of them or other views of them, but these results are consistent with what would be expected if police were aware that parents, brothers, and sisters have been in trouble.

In addition, families were important because of observable behaviors between parents and teens in which parents encouraged or failed to discourage negative behavior. This finding points to the importance of parenting practices—or the practice of everyday parenting—in which parents have the opportunity to influence their children in both positive and negative ways. In video observations, we observed things like parents laughing or teasing about the child’s misbehavior or ignoring deviant behaviors such as fighting. For example if a parent talked about doing something fun together when their child was suspended from school it was coded as a reward for negative behavior. Although this is not the main thrust of this research, we note that the effect of parent’s own juvenile delinquency is no longer significant when observed rewards for negative behavior are included. This is consistent with the notion that parents with a history of delinquency are more tolerant of their children’s problem behaviors which in turn increases the likelihood of a police contact. Other family predictors, conflict, and observed rewards for positive behavior were not predictive of police contacts. This finding is consistent with families socializing children in

a counter-normative direction, exposing their offspring to increased scrutiny from law enforcement.

Turning to the two environments that are central to our analyses, school and community, we found that the relationship between grades and police contacts was significant for White teens, but not for Blacks, suggesting that high academic performance, although important in other ways, does not protect Black teens from early contacts with law enforcement. Self-reported school discipline (including suspensions) was higher for Blacks than for Whites and accounts for racial differences in eighth-grade police contacts. During the time of the study, schools in Seattle had programs which linked police officers to middle schools. This practice is consistent with community policing as described by Garland (2001), which we expected might lead to greater risks for African American youths. Even though Seattle Public Schools' policy stated that officers were not to participate in school discipline, one cannot but help but speculate that these data may be reflecting police involvement in student disciplinary actions. Some officers may have believed that by intervening early they would decrease the likelihood of future police contacts and arrests. But, analyses by Hirschfield (2009) and Sweeten (2006), which find that arrest and involvement with the juvenile justice system increases school dropout should give these officers pause. In general, there is reason to believe that further criminalizing school infractions will not only have deleterious effects on future behavior, but also on school performance (Thompson, 2011). Of course it is also possible that youth with a police contact are the ones who are more likely to act out in school, which is not illegal, but can lead to more frequent and serious responses from school authorities. These cross-sectional data do not allow for a clear causal interpretation.

Finally, teen reports of neighborhood quality were not predictive of police contacts; however, parent report of resources and cohesiveness were, but only for Black teens. Parent's views of the neighborhood may be more objective and reliable. Cohesion and resources are related to crime rates, and poorer neighborhoods have a higher police presence, increasing the chances of contacts for Black teens. The same may not hold for Whites. Black teens may also live in a wider range of neighborhoods, with the poorest Blacks in poorer neighborhoods than poor Whites. If this is true, the relationship between neighborhood quality and police contacts may be stronger when comparing poor to moderate neighborhoods than when comparing moderate to high-quality ones.

Juveniles' reports of deviance in their broader adult network did significantly predict higher probability of police contact in both groups. Contact with such adults in the community may place teens in proximity to crime. Black youth report more deviant adults in their network. They are put at greater risk because association with deviant adults may lead police to consider the teen to be a lead in their investigations, or even a witness to illegal activity. Or police may simply associate the juvenile with adults involved in crime, and assume the teen is also involved.

The primary limitation of this study is the use of cross-sectional data which does not allow for disentangling cause and effect. Factors we include as predictors could be predicted by unmeasured variables which also predict police contacts (endogeneity). In some cases the predictors might be influenced by having had a police contact (reverse causality). We recognize potential problems with the reciprocal effects of police contacts, delinquency, and the environments that we study (see Hagan et al., 2002; Mateu-Gelabert, 2000; Sullivan, 2002). The analytic steps adding groups of predictors could be conducted in any order to reflect different levels of explanation. We chose an approach that reflects our specific hypotheses about how community policing might account for race differences beyond delinquent involvement. Regardless of the ordering in which predictors are added, once all of the predictors are included, the model is the same. Although we observed race differences

in almost all of the predictors, most of them did not predict police contacts and therefore cannot account for race differences in the likelihood of those contacts. The importance of school and adult network variables may be reciprocal in that kids who interact with police make lower grades, run afoul of school authorities, and are acquainted with more deviant adults, which leads to further police contacts. A second limitation is the lack of information about where and how specific police contacts occurred. More detailed information would help to illuminate how and why schools, siblings, and deviant adults contribute to police contacts beyond self-reported delinquent activity. Although the families in the African American sample are an accurate representation of the Black community in Seattle, nonparticipation by more affluent Whites could reduce our estimates of race differences and income disparities. In spite of this limitation, the race differences in income are striking. Finally we should note that our data collection began 10 years ago. Seattle Police Department practices have not changed appreciably since then, but we acknowledge that some community responses may have shifted. It is our view that there is value in documenting the patterns and processes that we have studied here, even with 10-year-old data; and such secondary data analyses are in keeping with National Science Foundation and National Institutes of Health efforts to encourage researchers to maximize the use of existing data sets.

We should note that Seattle's ethnic composition is different from some of the cities where a great deal of sociological and criminological research has been conducted (e.g. Chicago, New York, Boston). The African American population (8.5%) is relatively small, and Seattle has a sizable Asian American and Asian immigrant population, as well as growing African immigrant and Latino populations. In fact, after the 2010 U.S. Census of the population, one of Seattle's south-end zip codes was found to be the most diverse zip code in the nation. For three reasons we believe that our findings are worthy of note even with Seattle's ethnic composition. First, While Seattle differs ethnically from some large cities, it is much like others (e.g., Los Angeles, San Diego, Minneapolis), so while we would argue for caution in generalizing our findings, we believe that Seattle is not so unique as to raise serious concerns. Second, our sample, is drawn from that portion of Seattle that, both in ethnic and economic composition, is much more like cities with entrenched disadvantaged populations. Third, others have used the city of Seattle to do important research on policing and crime (e.g., Matsueda, Drakulich, & Kubrin, 2006; Weisburd, Bushway, Lum, & Yang, 2004).

What are the implications of our findings? On the positive side, some may argue that early police contacts should be seen as early intervention, particularly for children having problems at home, in school, or who are associating with bad elements in the community. Perhaps this is so, but the contrary may also be the case. Forty years ago, labeling theorists (Becker, 1963) described the negative possibilities of contacts with agents of social control. More recent publications in the labeling tradition continue to affirm these negative consequences (Lin, Grattlet, & Petersilia, 2010; Tapia, 2010; Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). The theory would predict that "unwarranted" contacts lead future problems, including perhaps to more crime and future involvement with the criminal justice system. Perhaps other negative outcomes, such as school failure, employment irregularity, or drug involvement may increase as well.

This is particularly troublesome because of the observed race differences in police contacts. Here we have seen that African American juveniles are more likely to have had police contacts and these cannot be explained by differential criminal involvement, at least not as measured by self-reported delinquent behavior. Nor do they appear to be the result of differential income, single parents, family conflict, delinquent peers, or overall neighborhood quality. There exists a dominant narrative in the Black community that police,

and the criminal justice system more broadly, discriminate against African Americans. Even those who believe that early intervention will sometimes “nip problems in the bud” should recognize that racial differences in criminal justice contacts that are not justified by criminal behavior will seem to confirm the accuracy of that narrative. Additional research is needed to explore the consequences for individual juveniles of the differential police contacts that we have observed, but it is now safe to say that it is very likely that the race differences that we do see, in confirming the discrimination narrative, are not good for the relationship between African American communities and law enforcement.

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Table 1
 Descriptive Statistics for Police Contacts and Individual, Family, Peer, School, and Neighborhood Predictors Collected in the Eighth Grade

Measure	Range	African American		European American		Total	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Police contact	0/1	0.40	0.49	0.21	0.41	0.30**	0.46
Property crime	0 – 4	0.25	0.68	0.11	0.37	0.18*	0.55
Violent crime	0 – 4	0.12	0.49	0.05	0.25	0.09	0.39
Race	0/1					0.49	0.50
Gender	0/1	0.49	0.50	0.48	0.50	0.48	0.50
Age	12 – 15	13.68	0.47	13.67	0.40	13.67	0.44
Per capita income	785 – 83,333	7,816	9,361	21,970	15,958	15,025***	14,913
Single parent	0/1	0.57	0.49	0.24	0.43	0.40***	0.49
Parent juv. del.	0 – 5	1.33	1.36	1.12	0.97	1.22	1.18
Sibling crime	0/1	0.13	0.34	0.08	0.27	0.11	0.31
Family conflict	-1.03-3.18	0.13	0.63	-0.12	0.52	0.00***	0.59
Obs. reward positive behavior	1 – 4.8	3.02	0.72	3.37	0.68	3.20***	0.72
Obs. reward negative/problem behavior	1 – 4.33	1.38	0.56	1.34	0.46	1.36	0.51
Delinquent peers	0/1	0.11	0.31	0.19	0.39	0.15*	0.36
Grades	1 – 5	3.33	1.01	3.99	1.11	3.66***	1.11
School discipline	-0.63 – 3.38	0.34	0.95	-0.25	0.69	0.04***	0.88
Parent neighborhood	2.50 – 5	3.88	0.54	3.94	0.39	3.91	0.47
Teen neighborhood	1 – 4	2.97	0.59	3.13	0.54	3.05*	0.57
Deviant adult network	1 – 5	2.13	1.14	1.53	0.83	1.82***	1.04

Significance tests indicate race differences of

* p < .05,

** p < .001,

*** p < .0001

Table 2
Odds Ratios for Logistic Regressions Predicting Self-report Police Contact by Eighth Grade

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4	Step 5	Step 6	Step 7
Property crime	2.70*	2.44***	2.03*	1.66	1.45	1.37	1.10
Violent crime	2.14*	2.20	2.29	2.15	1.92	1.56	1.14
Race	2.26	1.97*	1.93*	1.95*	2.32*	1.51	1.40
Gender		0.51*	0.46*	0.43**	0.43**	0.60	0.50*
Age		1.49	1.52	1.38	1.36	1.40	1.19
Per capita income		1.15	1.04	1.05	1.03	1.01	1.13
Single parent		1.04	1.12	1.05	0.98	0.80	0.83
Parent juv. del.			1.34*	1.32*	1.32*	1.24	1.17
Sibling crime			4.22**	4.26**	4.47**	3.65**	3.75**
Family conflict				1.48	1.40	1.20	1.22
Obs. reward positive behavior				0.81	0.76	0.85	0.82
Obs. reward negative/problem behavior				2.72**	2.62**	2.31**	2.65**
Delinquent peers					2.58*	2.05	1.50
Grades						0.80	0.78
School discipline						2.18**	1.94**
Parent neighborhood							0.77
Teen neighborhood							0.79
Deviant adult network							1.65**
Adj. / pseudo R ²	.07	.10	.15	.20	.31	.35	.41

* p < .05,

*** p < .01

/ Adjusted pseudo R² are based on models without imputed data.