# The Case for Conceptualizing Youth–Police Contact as a Racialized Adverse Childhood Experience

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**See also Geller, p. 1300.**

In comparison with other age groups, youths are disproportionately subjected to increased surveillance by and involuntary contact with the police. Youths' overexposure to the police is partly attributable to their regular and extensive use of public spaces, the ongoing deployment of proactive policing tactics (i.e., strict enforcement of minor crimes to deter criminal behavior), and police presence in schools. In 2018, more than 10 million US youths and young adults (approximately one in four) experienced a police encounter, and approximately two thirds of these were police initiated.[1] Recent findings from national data indicate that such encounters can produce significant deleterious impacts to health and well-being.[2] Still, these seemingly ubiquitous police-initiated interactions with young people in the United States are not randomly distributed, but instead are more heavily concentrated in underresourced communities of color and serve as conduits for racial stratification in the criminal legal system. Specifically, abundant evidence indicates that Black youths—particularly those in disadvantaged, marginalized communities—are disproportionately stopped by the police.[3] Many questions remain, however, about police hypersurveillance of youths, including whether the distribution of specific interactional features of youth–police encounters is also racialized on a national scale.

In this issue of *AJPH*, Geller (p. 1300) illuminates this critical gap in our collective knowledge with her analysis of national data measuring youth–police contact in urban areas of the United States. Geller's analysis focuses on how race intersects with age, sex, and class to predict interactional features of youth–police encounters and, in doing so, expands on existing evidence linking aggressive policing to emotional distress, stigma, and posttraumatic stress among this sample of youths.[2]

She finds that nearly one in three youths reporting police-initiated contact was first stopped by the police when they were between 8 and 12 years of age. Furthermore, vicarious police contact was exceedingly common among these youths, with 69% reporting indirect exposure to police stops through family, friends, neighbors, and associates. Although vicarious stops were largely unrelated to race in this sample, Geller's analysis revealed that Black boys in particular were most likely to experience direct police-initiated contact, and more than two thirds of those stopped reported officer aggression or intrusiveness during their most salient stop. By contrast, this was the case for only one in four White boys who were stopped. Experiences of officer intrusion were also concentrated among Black girls and virtually nonexistent among White girls. Exposure to aggressive policing was, therefore, heavily racialized among boys and girls. Still, these disparities were concentrated among low socioeconomic status youths. For boys, moreover, racial disparities were largest at higher levels of delinquency, despite persisting across youths' behavioral profiles.

Geller's work powerfully underscores the burdens of inequitable youth–police interactions and unequivocally reveals these experiences in the lives of Black youths for what they are—adverse childhood experiences, or "events that pose a serious threat to a child's physical or psychological well-being."[4] The descriptor of Black youths' exposures to aggressive policing as adverse childhood experiences, therefore, is not only apt, but completely harmonious with Geller's findings. But let me be perfectly clear—these youth–police encounters are not only adverse for Black youths but also traumatic, as they are experienced as "extremely frightening, harmful, or threatening"[4] and have the capacity to trigger recurring negative emotions and physiological symptoms. The posttraumatic stress associated with these events is evidenced by recent population-based research,[2] studies

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examining physiological stress biomarkers,[5] and qualitative research grounded in youth voices.[6–8] When Black youths describe the police, they describe them as dangerous, controlling, untrustworthy, and prejudiced, and their encounters (or anticipated encounters) with them as overwhelming, emotionally draining, and serving only to exacerbate and "compound everyday adversities."[6–8] One Black youth in Baltimore even referred to the police as his "number one fear in life."[6]

Ultimately, what these youths convey in this work is that police-induced trauma is, in many respects, its own class of trauma; it is set apart as a uniquely potent historical, racialized, intergenerational form of trauma that is affixed to a collective experience of marginalization. It is, as Bryant-Davis and her colleagues put it, "racially motivated police brutality trauma"[9(p854)] that demands interpretation through the appropriate sociocultural lens. We must acknowledge that, for Black youths, police-initiated microaggressions and violence—which are often inextricably tied to assumptions of Black criminality—are toxic, modern-day echoes of centuries of abuse and oppression, channeled through an institution that has been an instrument of structural racism for centuries. Such an acknowledgment also necessitates that we examine this form of adversity in context. Upon doing so, we can begin to unravel a profound paradox: although youths' exposures to aggressive policing are certainly racialized adverse childhood experiences, they also defy categorization as isolated experiences or discrete events because of the crippling and seemingly unending weight of dread and hypervigilance in which these experiences are embedded. If events characterized by these features and producing these intense reactions do not qualify as adverse, I am not sure what does.

Moving forward, explicit examinations of exposure to aggressive policing in the context of other adverse childhood experiences are needed, including closer attention to how racialized, aggressive policing may not be fully captured by current screening tools. For instance, despite the push to expand the concept of adverse childhood experiences in recent years, few existing tools that screen for adverse childhood experiences ask about police contact[10] and may consequently overlook many affected youths in need of supports and services. Ultimately, we cannot ameliorate the health inequities associated with this form of state-perpetrated violence if we are not conducting proper screenings, and thus far, there has been no systematic effort in the United States to measure and study the aggressive policing of youths in the context of other adverse childhood experiences.

Given the present findings, it may be necessary to examine racialized, aggressive policing through a culturally informed adverse childhood experiences (or C-ACE) framework,[11] which acknowledges that, in the United States, certain racism-related adversities may be especially concentrated among Black youths. Considering that aggressive policing undermines adolescent well-being,[2] more research is also needed to fully disentangle exactly how both direct and vicarious exposure to violent and aggressive policing might contribute to inequities in adolescent mental and physical health via racial stratification. Finally, we must identify the policy and programmatic levers capable of mitigating the trauma of racialized police encounters, such as school personnel who can and should be trained to facilitate nonstigmatizing, culturally competent conversations about these experiences in ways that provide support and prevent retraumatization.

In 2018, the American Public Health Association released a statement concerning the pressing need to address police violence against communities of color as a public health issue.[12] Ultimately, Geller's results reaffirm that need while also beckoning us to confront the ongoing and particularly egregious crisis of overpolicing Black youths in US communities and its countless harms, which we still do not fully comprehend. It is well past the time to curtail police hypersurveillance of youths and bolster community infrastructure to promote enhanced youth participation in the bastions of civic life and engagement, such as community centers, after-school programs, and youth empowerment programs. We must honor the humanity of and potential in all youths, centering our efforts on their strengths and trusting in and enabling their boundless promise. Youths have a voice and they have spoken. Will we listen? AJPH

## CORRESPONDENCE

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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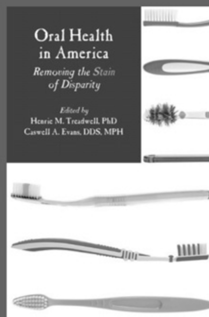


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