Original article

# Police Stops Among At-Risk Youth: Repercussions for Mental Health

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A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** The aim of the study was to examine the proximate mental health consequences of stressful and emotionally charged interactions with police officers among a national sample of at-risk youth who have been stopped by the police.
**Methods:** A sample of 918 youth (average age 15 years) in the U.S. who reported being stopped by police in the most recent wave (2014—2017) of the Fragile Families & Child Wellbeing Study was used in the present study.
**Results:** Although age at first stop was not associated with mental health outcomes, youth stopped by police more frequently were more likely to report heightened emotional distress and post-traumatic stress symptoms. Findings also indicate that being stopped at school and officer intrusiveness were potent predictors of these adverse emotional and mental health responses to the stop.
**Conclusions:** Under certain circumstances, the police stop can result in feelings of stigma and trauma among at-risk youth. Youth may benefit when school counselors or social workers provide mental health screenings and offer counseling care after police encounters, particularly when such encounters are intrusive and/or occur at school.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTION**

Under certain circumstances, the police stop can result in feelings of stigma and trauma among at-risk youth. Youth may benefit when school counselors or social workers provide mental health screenings and offer counseling care after police encounters, particularly when such encounters are intrusive and/or occur at school.

A long line of research has revealed an elevated risk of numerous deleterious health outcomes among justice-involved individuals [1–3], including justice-involved youth [4,5]. In the case of most youth, however, police encounters are the only form of contact they are likely to have with the criminal justice system [6,7]. A significant proportion of police officers' interactions with the public, moreover, involve contact with youth [6,8–10], due at least in part to youth's age, extensive use of public space [11], and elevated involvement in delinquent activities [12,13], in addition to the implementation of proactive policing strategies in communities and schools [14–19]. In light of the prevalence of youth contact with the police, an emergent body of literature has sought to explore whether youth encounters with the police might have ramifications for adolescent health and well-being [5,20–23]. Youth may feel various emotions during and/or after a police stop, which are in part dependent on youth traits and associated perceptions of justice actors [24]. Even so, particularly distressing encounters may be especially harmful to adolescent mental health [20–22].

Although some research has investigated whether police contact is linked to adverse mental health outcomes, many of these studies focus on adults [25–27]. The handful of studies focusing on youth's contact with police and subsequent mental health perturbations generally lack details concerning specific contextual features of the stop (e.g., age at first stop, times stopped, and location stopped) and the level of police intrusiveness/hostility [5,20–22]. Such details are crucial to the advancement of this literature, as more hostile, strained interactions that are perceived as unfair or discriminatory would be expected to be particularly distressing and may take a greater toll on the mental health of youth, above and beyond criminal justice contact more generally [28,29]. Importantly, extant studies of youth samples do not explore varied mental health responses to differential features of police encounters (e.g., contextual features of the stop and officer behavior during the stop) *among youth who have been stopped by the police*. To our knowledge, the only published work examining the mental health correlates of police-initiated contact among youth does not use youth reports of emotional and mental distress asked in direct reference to a police encounter [21]. Research to date, moreover, has largely relied on local or regional samples with limited generalizability [21] and has often examined samples of young people on the cusp of adulthood (e.g., late teens and early 20s) [21]. Furthermore, although trauma and anxiety after a police stop have been examined on occasion [21], negative emotional reactions during the police encounter, as well experiences of social stigma and feelings of shame after the encounter, have been overlooked.

The objective of the present study was to examine variation in mental health responses among youth who have been stopped by the police. In particular, we examine whether differences in contextual features (e.g., age at first stop, times stopped, and location stopped) and police behavior (e.g., frisking and threat of force) predict varying levels of emotional distress during the stop and experiences of stigma and posttraumatic stress after the stop among youth with a history of police-initiated encounters. In addition, we also conduct a number of ancillary analyses that separate out the effects of contextual features and officer intrusiveness on emotional/mental responses by degree of self-reported delinquent involvement.

## Methods

For the present study, data come from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study (FFCWS). The FFCWS is a large, national study of approximately 4,800 children who were born between the years of 1998 and 2000. The study includes six waves of data collection to date, with the most recent wave of data collection occurring between 2014 and 2017. At the most recent wave of data collection, 3,444 youth participated in the youth survey. The FFCWS data were obtained using a multistaged, clustered sampling procedure in which unmarried, low-income couples with one or more children were oversampled. As a result, the sample includes a large number of at-risk families and children, making them well-suited to the present study. Using a population of cities with 200,000 or more residents, a stratified random sample of 20 U.S. cities was selected. The subsequent sampling stage involved the selection of 75 hospitals within these 20 cities, which was followed by a random sample of couples who had just given birth to a child and who consented to participate in the study. In the present study, we restrict the sample to youth who

participated in the sixth (i.e., Year 15) wave of data collection and reported being stopped by the police (N = 918). Even so, missing data were multiply imputed in STATA 15.1 [30] using mi commands (20 imputations). The present study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Texas at San Antonio.

### Outcome measures

*Emotional distress during stop.* Stopped youth were asked to report on the emotions they experienced during the stop (or the most salient stop for youths with multiple stops). To be precise, youths were asked the following: At the time of this incident, did you feel (1) Safe? (2) Scared? (3) Angry? Responses to each of these items were *Yes* (coded as 1) or *No* (coded as 0). The first item, however, was reverse coded so that youth who responded that they *did not* feel safe during the stop were assigned a value of 1 (and youth who reported feeling safe during the stop were assigned a value of 0). Each item was ultimately coded as an individual binary item, and subsequently, the items were summed into a composite measure of youth emotional distress during the stop (alpha = .73).

*Social stigma after stop.* Stopped youth responded to 11 binary items pertaining to feelings of stigma after being stopped by police. Items include, but are not limited to, the following: "People have avoided you," "People have used the fact that you were stopped to hurt your feelings," "You sometimes avoid people because you think they might look down on you," and "You sometimes hide the fact that you were stopped from your friends and family." Ultimately, the 11 stigma items were summed into a stigma index (alpha = .74).

*Posttraumatic stress after stop.* Stopped youth also responded to nine binary items pertaining to posttraumatic stress after the stop. Items such as "Remembering this experience brings back your feelings about having been stopped," "You think about having been stopped even when you do not mean to," "Pictures of this incident sometimes pop into your mind," and "Reminders of the time you were stopped cause you to have physical reactions such as sweating, trouble breathing, nausea, or a pounding heart" were included. Ultimately, the nine items were summed into a posttraumatic stress index (alpha = .76).

### Police encounter variables

At the most recent wave of data collection, when youth were, on average, approximately 15.62 years of age, they were asked whether they had ever been stopped by the police. Response options included *Yes* (coded as 1) and *No* (coded as 0). In the imputed sample, 918 of the 3,444 youth reported being stopped by the police. All analyses were restricted to the subsample of youth who were stopped by the police (N = 918).

*Contextual features of stop(s).* A number of follow-up questions were asked of youths who reported being stopped by the police at the most recent wave of data collection. These include the following: age at first stop, number of times stopped, and locations stopped. We employed these youth-reported items to create the following variables: *Young at First Stop*, *Number of Stops*, *Stopped on Street*, *Stopped at School*, *Stopped on Street & at School*, and *Stopped at Other Location*. Considering the average

age of the sample, youth were categorized as young at first stop if they were aged 13 years or younger at the time of their first stop. Alternative age cut-offs (e.g., <15 years) did not alter the results in any way. Youth were assigned the value corresponding to the number of times they had been stopped by police in their lifetime on the *Number of Stops* variable. To examine the location(s) where youth had been stopped by police, we created dummy variables for specific stop locations reported, including street, school, both street and school, and other location.

*Officer intrusiveness.* During the most recent wave of data collection, youth were also asked about the behavior of law enforcement during the stop, or, in the case of youths with multiple stops, the most salient stop. Specifically, youths were asked whether the following forms of officer intrusiveness occurred: "Did the officer (1) Frisk you or pat you down? (2) Search your bags or pockets? (3) Use harsh language? (4) Use racial slurs? (5) Threaten physical force? or (6) Use physical force?" Responses to each of these items were *Yes* (coded as 1) or *No* (coded as 0). We also constructed an item in which youth who were handcuffed but not arrested were assigned a value of 1, and all other stopped youth were assigned a value of 0. Each item pertaining to officer intrusiveness was coded as a binary item, and subsequently, the items were summed into a total count measure of officer intrusiveness.

### Covariates

The following covariates were included in each of the multivariate models: prior delinquency and substance use index (alpha = .71), male, youth age, youth black, youth Hispanic, maternal relationship status with the biological father (i.e., married, cohabiting, and with separated as the reference category), household income, material hardship (alpha = .75), maternal education, maternal low self-control (alpha = .85), maternal depression (met clinical criteria), parental incarceration, parenting stress index (alpha = .69), and low neighborhood collective efficacy index (alpha = .86). Models examining a specific contextual feature (i.e., age at first stop, number of stops, and location of stops) also account for the other two contextual features listed.

The analysis proceeds as follows. First, we examine whether the contextual features of police stops are associated with the emotional and mental health of stopped youth (either during or after the stop) using ordinary least squares regression. Second, we use ordinary least squares regression to explore whether specific forms of officer intrusiveness are associated with the emotional and mental health of stopped youth. Finally, we conduct a number of regression analyses that separate out the effects of contextual features and officer intrusiveness on emotional/mental responses by degree of self-reported delinquent involvement.

### Results

We begin by summarizing the results of the univariate analyses displayed in Table 1. The results indicate that 39% of youth stopped by the police were age ≤13 years at the time of their first stop. The average number of police stops among stopped youth was 2.54. Most youth stopped by the police report being stopped on the street (89%), with a minority being stopped at school (24%) and other locations (29%). The most common form of

**Table 1**
Select descriptive statistics for imputed sample of youth stopped by police (N = 918)

| Variables | Mean | Proportion | Range | Standard deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Young at first stop | — | .39 | 0–1 | .49 |
| Number of stops | 2.54 | — | 0–11 | 2.35 |
| Location | | | | |
| Street | — | .89 | 0–1 | .31 |
| School | — | .24 | 0–1 | .43 |
| Street and school | — | .17 | 0–1 | .38 |
| Other | — | .29 | 0–1 | .46 |
| Officer intrusiveness | | | | |
| Handcuffed youth (no arrest) | — | .13 | 0–1 | .33 |
| Frisked youth | — | .34 | 0–1 | .48 |
| Searched youth | — | .38 | 0–1 | .48 |
| Used harsh language | — | .22 | 0–1 | .41 |
| Used racial slurs | — | .08 | 0–1 | .27 |
| Threat of force | — | .14 | 0–1 | .35 |
| Use of force | — | .12 | 0–1 | .32 |
| Total count | 1.40 | — | 0–7 | 1.75 |
| Mental health outcomes | | | | |
| Emotional distress during stop (index) | 1.21 | — | 0–3 | 1.01 |
| Social stigma after stop (index) | 4.81 | — | 0–11 | 1.80 |
| Posttraumatic stress after stop (index) | 3.60 | — | 0–9 | 2.44 |

officer intrusiveness among youth stopped by police was searching (38%), followed by frisking (34%). Racial slurs were the least common (8%). The average number of acts of intrusion in a given stop is 1.40.

Next, we present the results of analyses exploring whether, net of covariates, contextual features of police stops are significantly associated with differential emotional and mental health responses to the stop among youth who have been stopped by the police. The results are displayed in Table 2. Supplemental analyses examining associations between covariates and mental health outcomes indicate that among stopped youth (N = 918), males are significantly less likely to report emotional distress and posttraumatic stress after the stop, but youth residing in neighborhoods characterized by low neighborhood collective efficacy are significantly more likely to report posttraumatic stress after a stop (Appendix). In addition, Hispanic youth, older youth, and youth with incarcerated fathers report higher levels of emotional distress during the stop (Appendix). The key findings illustrated in Table 2, however, indicate that young age at first stop is not significantly associated with emotional distress during the stop, social stigma after the stop, or posttraumatic stress after the stop. Conversely, youth who have been stopped by the police more often are significantly more likely to report that, in a given, salient stop, they felt higher levels of emotional distress during the stop (B = .09, standard error [SE] = .01; beta = .21) and experienced greater posttraumatic stress after the stop (B = .12, SE = .03; beta = .11). The findings displayed in Table 2 also reveal, in general, that youth who had been stopped by the police at school (relative to any other location) reported significantly higher levels of emotional distress during the stop (B = .32, standard error = .08; beta = .14), social stigma after the stop (B = .50, SE = .14; beta = .12), and posttraumatic stress after the stop (B = .61, SE = .19; beta = .11). Findings pertaining to being

**Table 2**
Contextual features of police stops and emotional and mental health among stopped youth (N = 918)

| Contextual features | Emotional distress during stop | | Social stigma after stop | | Posttraumatic stress after stop | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B/beta | SE | B/beta | SE | B/beta | SE |
| Young at first stop | .03/.05 | .02 | .19/.05 | .13 | −.01/−.01 | .05 |
| Number of stops | .09*/.21 | .01 | .04/.03 | .05 | .12*/.11 | .03 |
| Location of stop(s) | | | | | | |
| Street | .09/.03 | .11 | −.30/−.05 | .20 | .07/.01 | .26 |
| School | .32*/.14 | .08 | .50*/.12 | .14 | .61*/.11 | .19 |
| Street and school | .40*/.15 | .09 | .45*/.10 | .17 | .87*/.14 | .23 |
| Other | −.09/−.04 | .07 | .16/.04 | .14 | .18/.04 | .18 |

Results are derived from multiply imputed data. Covariates included but not shown to conserve space. prior delinquency (alpha = .71), male, youth age, youth black, youth Hispanic, maternal relationship status with the biological father (i.e., married, cohabiting, with separated as the reference category), household income, material hardship (alpha = .75), maternal education, maternal low self-control (alpha = .85), maternal depression (met clinical criteria), parental incarceration, parenting stress (alpha = .69), and low neighborhood collective efficacy (alpha = .86). Models examining a specific contextual feature (i.e., age at first stop, number of stops, and location of stops) also account for the other two contextual features listed.
SE = standard error.
*p < .05.

stopped in the street and in other locations apart from school, however, were consistently null. Even so, youth with a history of stops both in the street *and* at school reported that during or after a given, salient stop, they experienced significantly higher levels of emotional distress (B = .40, SE = .09; beta = .15), social stigma (B = .45, SE = .17; beta = .10), and posttraumatic stress (B = .87, SE = .23; beta = .14).

We subsequently turned to analyses examining the role of diverse forms of officer intrusiveness in the emotional and mental health of stopped youth. The findings are displayed in Table 3. The results uniformly indicate that each form of officer intrusion is associated with significantly higher scores on emotional distress during the stop, social stigma after the stop, and posttraumatic stress after the stop. Furthermore, relative to all covariates, the count measure of officer intrusiveness was the most robust predictor of all three mental/emotional health measures. The pattern of results depicted in Table 3 is further illustrated in Figure 1. The figure displays the predicted percentile score on the emotional and mental health responses to police stops by degree of officer intrusiveness, adjusted for covariates. As displayed in the figure, youth reporting all seven forms of officer intrusiveness are predicted to score approximately 48 percentile points higher on emotional distress than stopped youth reporting no officer intrusiveness, net of covariates. In a similar fashion, youth reporting all seven forms of officer intrusiveness are predicted to score nearly 41 percentile points higher on posttraumatic stress after the stop than stopped youth reporting

no officer intrusiveness, net of covariates. The pattern is similar in the case of stigma; however, only a 27 percentile-point increase is detected moving from no intrusion to all forms of intrusion.

Finally, we conducted several ancillary analyses that partition the sample by degree of self-reported delinquent involvement and estimate the effects of contextual features and officer intrusiveness on emotional/mental responses. We identified no significant differences in the role of age at first stop, number of times stopped, locations stopped, and intrusiveness of the stop in reports of emotional distress during the stop and posttraumatic stress after the stop among stopped youth with differing histories of delinquency. Generally speaking, therefore, the findings do not suggest any consistent difference in the emotional/mental response by degree of prior involvement in delinquency. There is, however, one exception. In the case of the association between being stopped at school and feelings of stigma after the stop, a robust, significant association (beta = .16) emerged only among less delinquent youth (i.e., below the mean delinquency score). Still, ancillary analyses also indicate that youth who are more deeply entrenched in delinquency do not appear to be immune to the emotional distress, trauma, or stigma associated with *intrusive* stops in these data. For instance, total officer intrusiveness yields a significant, standardized coefficient of .31 when predicting posttraumatic stress among the more delinquent subsample, which is almost identical to the coefficient for the full sample (beta = .32) and only slightly smaller than the

**Table 3**
Officer intrusiveness and emotional and mental health among stopped youth (N = 918)

| Officer intrusiveness | Emotional distress during stop | | Social stigma after stop | | Post-traumatic stress after stop | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | B/beta | SE | B/beta | SE | B/beta | SE |
| Handcuffed youth (no arrest) | .39*/.13 | .10 | .50*/.09 | .18 | .97*/.13 | .25 |
| Frisked youth | .74*/.35 | .07 | .66*/.18 | .14 | 1.08*/.21 | .19 |
| Searched youth | .60*/.29 | .07 | .44*/.12 | .14 | 1.02*/.20 | .18 |
| Used harsh language | .67*/.27 | .08 | .48*/.11 | .15 | 1.22*/.20 | .20 |
| Used racial slurs | .49*/.15 | .12 | .75*/.12 | .23 | 1.37*/.15 | .30 |
| Threat of force | .58*/.20 | .10 | .55*/.11 | .18 | 1.40*/.20 | .24 |
| Use of force | .61*/.20 | .11 | .54*/.10 | .20 | 1.41*/.19 | .26 |
| Officer intrusiveness (count) | .23*/.40 | .02 | .21*/.20 | .04 | .45*/.32 | .05 |

Results are derived from multiply imputed data. Full list of covariates included but not shown to conserve space.
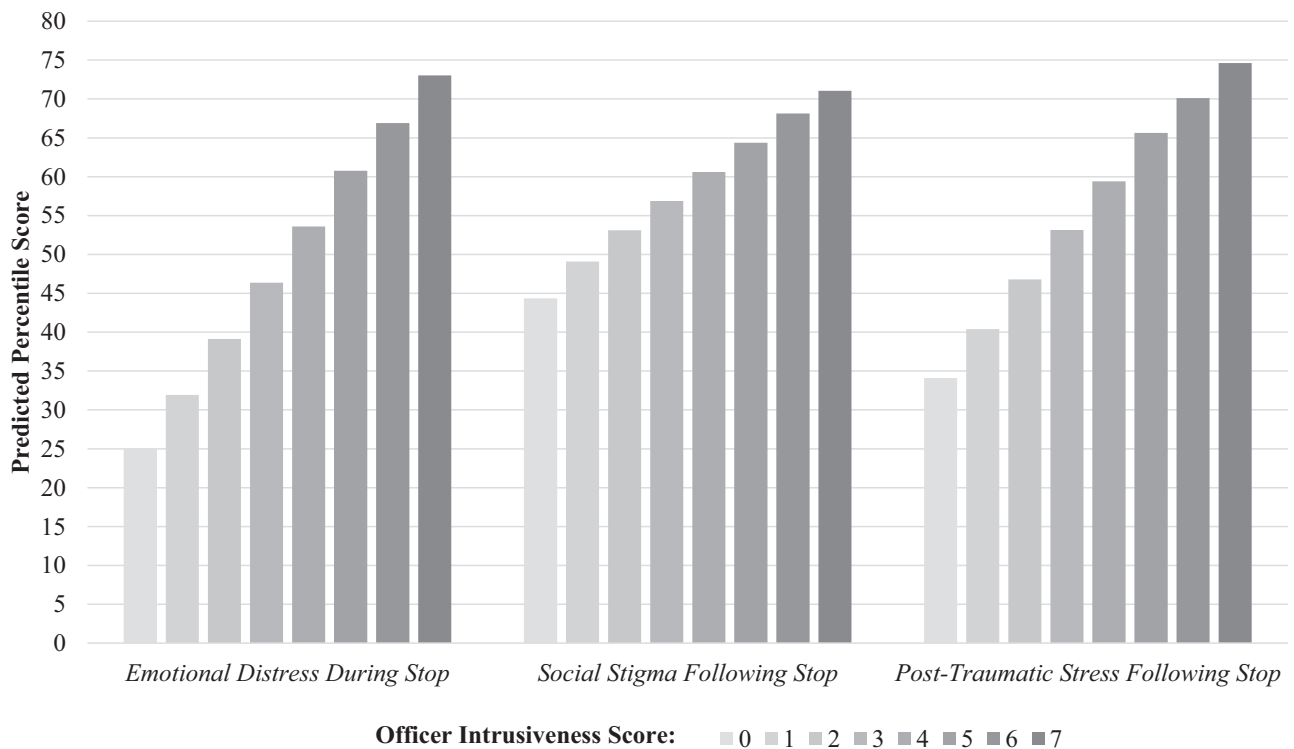SE = standard error.
*p < .05.

**Figure 1.** Predicted percentile scores of emotional and mental health responses by officer intrusiveness score, net of covariates.

coefficient for the less delinquent subsample (beta = .34). An equality of coefficients test reveals that the magnitude of the coefficient does not significantly differ across these subsamples (z = −1.06, p = .29) [31]. Finally, when emotional distress is disaggregated into its components, analyses suggest that it is anger and feeling unsafe that are significantly associated with police stops at school and officer intrusiveness, regardless of the extent of youth's prior history of delinquency. Fear, alternatively, was not significantly associated with features of the police stop.

## Discussion

In this study, we sought to illuminate the consequences of various features of police stops for the health and well-being of at-risk youth. Specifically, we found that youth who have been stopped more frequently were more likely to report heightened emotional distress and posttraumatic stress symptoms after the encounter. Notably, youth stopped at school experienced the greatest levels of these emotions, including the feeling of being socially stigmatized by the event. Feelings of stigma, for example, may be because of the relatively public nature of the event in an especially conventional/prosocial setting. Still, ancillary analyses revealed that school stops are only associated with an enhanced likelihood of poststop feelings of stigma among youth with less robust histories of delinquency. This may suggest greater shame and embarrassment when these more conventional youth experience a police encounter in the school setting. We also found that, apart from the location of the stop and regardless of prior offending history, various forms of officer intrusiveness were potent predictors of emotional distress, trauma, and stigma,

particularly as acts of officer intrusiveness accumulated within a given stop.

Although the present study provides a number of insights concerning the circumstances of adolescent police stops that are linked to significant variation in mental health responses, it is not without its limitations. First, as the Fragile Families study over-samples high-risk, urban-born children, the findings of this study may not be generalizable beyond this population. Nevertheless, our results speak to a particularly relevant population, as shifts to proactive policing tactics over the past two decades have largely occurred in lower income urban communities [32,33]. Second, the data do not allow us to externally validate the details of the stop (e.g., using school or police records) or to determine the exact timing of the stop being referenced (i.e., the only stop or most salient stop) beyond the age (in years) at which youth were first stopped by the police. Recall of emotional and mental health responses may vary depending on how recently the stop in question occurred. Given the reliance on a self-report measurement strategy, the possibility that shared method variance may be inflating our estimates cannot be entirely ruled out. To the extent possible, future research should address these limitations pertaining to the measurement of police stops and their features. Third, despite controlling for pre-existing individual differences between youth, models examining the link between the number of stops and mental health may be subject to an unknown degree of omitted variable bias. Finally, it is possible that relevant factors such as community context or the strength of social support networks could buffer some of the adverse effects related to intrusive and distressing police encounters. Future research should build on the present results and investigate the factors that might shield adolescents against any negative health consequences of police stops.

*Public Health Implications*

Collectively, the present findings suggest the potential for extensive compromises in emotional and mental well-being among some youth stopped by the police. Several policy implications directly stem from these results. For instance, the particularly deleterious consequences found during stops at schools suggest that school counselors or social workers could provide mental health screenings and offer counseling care after these events in an effort to address uncomfortable and distressing emotions in the aftermath of the police encounter. Specifically, counselors should work in tandem with students and police officers to approach students with a trauma-informed and evidence-based perspective, especially when stops are experienced as particularly distressing [34]. In light of the upsurge of police officers at schools in recent years [35], systematic evaluation of patrolling and stopping strategies as a required element of training for officers who are regularly stationed on school grounds would be beneficial [36]. In addition to the offering of direct services to these youth, our findings highlight the need for improved police–youth relations. In terms of prevention, for example, police could go into high-risk schools and provide preparatory awareness training on what their procedures are when they stop a youth suspected of a crime. This may serve to alleviate distress among youth if they know what is likely to occur before the event. Police officers in schools have an important role to play in enhancing youth–police relations, as they are positioned at the nexus of multiple systems (e.g., education and juvenile justice) [16]. In anticipation of the potential for strained interactions, equipping officers with conflict resolution skills and developmentally sensitive knowledge on the period of adolescence would be useful [37]. Ultimately, minimizing the adverse mental health consequences of strained police–youth encounters may result in long-term cost savings [38].

## Funding Sources

## Supplementary Data

Supplementary data related to this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.05.027.

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