How Police Activity Results in Social Costs to Communities

A FACT SHEET ON THE COSTS OF OVERRELIANCE ON POLICING

Aaron Stagoff-Belfort, Daniel Bodah, and Daniela Gilbert
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There is a basic assumption among policymakers that policing is cost effective, meaning that the community-safety benefits that come from policing exceed the costs of funding police activities. Yet evidence shows that increased policing does not necessarily create safer communities, and police activity can actually lead to social costs. Ignoring these social costs can overestimate the benefits of policing and mislead policymakers about the effectiveness of policing in improving community safety and well-being.

These social costs can affect communities in ways that ripple beyond interactions with law enforcement—influencing physical and behavioral health, educational opportunities, jobs, housing, and even the fabric of civic engagement.

IN THE UNITED STATES, MORE THAN NINE MILLION ARRESTS ARE MADE EACH YEAR—ONE EVERY THREE SECONDS.

80%

ARE FOR LOW-LEVEL OFFENSES, AND ONLY

5%

ARE FOR SERIOUS VIOLENT CRIMES.

As stops by police, arrests, and civilian deaths involving law enforcement remain incredibly high in the United States, policymakers must consider the full cost of these interactions as they determine the amount of public dollars that go to policing. Updating this calculation to include social costs is even more critical as disproportionate policing of Black communities and other communities of color means that these communities primarily and unjustly bear the social costs of U.S. policing.

What are the actual costs of policing?

Research consistently demonstrates that policing has collateral consequences that harm the health, educational development, economic well-being, and civic and social engagement of individuals, families, and neighborhoods. These consequences are not only tied to killings by police or arrests leading to convictions. Instead, the mere presence of police conducting stops or interacting with residents can have ripple effects across a community and over time. Being arrested but not convicted can cause significant harm, even without any additional involvement in the criminal legal system. Simply being in the presence of a stop or an arrest can have adverse effects on a person, regardless of their level of involvement.

These costs compound and influence a broad array of social outcomes. As policymakers and community leaders make decisions about how to leverage law enforcement, they should consider the holistic costs of policing within a community.

The social costs of policing generally fall into four categories:

- **damage to the health of individuals and communities;**
- **suppression of educational achievement;**
- **harm to economic security;** and
- **reductions in civic participation and community engagement.**

HOW DOES POLICING CREATE "SOCIAL COSTS"?

Involvement with or exposure to a range of policing activities can result in social costs: people suffering physical and behavioral health problems, losing educational opportunities, experiencing employment and housing precarity, and withdrawing from community life. These effects come not only from interactions with police, but also from indirect exposure to routine policing activities, such as living in a neighborhood where police commonly stop people on the street.

These social costs have negative effects on people's physical and mental health, earning potential, school achievement, and engagement in civic life. These effects compound to create larger costs to society.

The cost to health

Encounters with police can be stressful and traumatic. When policing is part of the everyday ecosystem of a neighborhood, community health can suffer, especially in heavily policed communities of color. Contact with law enforcement in these neighborhoods also has a cumulative effect, exacerbating the trauma of previous bad experiences. These experiences spread through social networks and can even harm the health of residents who are not personally subjected to police contact. Processing traumatic stress can be especially difficult for youth, distorting cognitive growth and development.

WHAT THE SOCIAL COSTS TO HEALTH LOOK LIKE:

Police interactions have a direct cost to individual health...

- Research has shown that police stops increased stress in Black college students in the Midwest and anxiety and PTSD-related symptoms in young men in Chicago.

...but also an indirect cost to community health.

- Mothers of children who were stopped by police—even a single stop—were more likely to report sleep problems due to depression and anxiety.
- Research shows that living in neighborhoods where pedestrian stops are more likely to become invasive and result in frisking is associated with worse health.

The cost to education

An arrest or other negative encounter with police is a fundamentally disruptive experience, particularly for children. It can cause students to miss school or fall behind on schoolwork, and teens with these experiences typically have lower grades, worse standardized test scores, and take less advanced coursework, leading them to be less likely to complete high school and enroll in college. Young Black men suffer the most, in part because they are more likely than other young people to be stopped, arrested, or mistreated by law enforcement.

WHAT THE SOCIAL COSTS TO EDUCATION LOOK LIKE:

Police interactions have a direct cost to an individual's educational outcomes...

- Police contact—ranging from street stops to arrests to proximity to killings by police—leads to lower high school graduation and college enrollment rates.
- Stop-and-frisk policing policies in New York City led to 1.35 missed school days for Black boys, accounting for about one-fifth of the standardized test score gap between Black and white students.

...but also an indirect cost to the overall community.

- Living in a heavily policed neighborhood—where children witness or hear about their peers' encounters with law enforcement—may be enough to hurt educational development.
- For example, from 2002 to 2016, local killings by police led nearly 2,000 Black and Latinx students to leave Los Angeles-area schools before graduating.

The economic cost

An arrest can impair economic self-sufficiency not just for people who are arrested but also for their families and wider social networks. When someone in a household loses employment following an arrest, that person's family may not be able to pay for food, housing, or childcare. These collateral consequences can destabilize communities, increasing scarcity in the very neighborhoods—usually communities of color—that have been historically subject to disinvestment and neglect.

WHAT THE SOCIAL COSTS TO ECONOMIC SECURITY LOOK LIKE:

Police interactions have a direct cost to individual financial well-being...

- People arrested between the ages of 21 and 23 were 13 percent more likely to receive public assistance and 16 percent more likely to be unemployed about a decade later.
- An arrest between the ages of 25 and 30—prime working years—can reduce financial assets by 53 percent.

...even if that person has no conviction history.

- Even a single arrest without any conviction leads to lower employment prospects, decreasing the chances for a job interview callback. This effect was about the same across races but Black people and other people of color are much more likely to be affected, given their greater likelihood of experiencing policing.

The cost to civic and social engagement

Nearly one quarter of people in the United States interact in some way with police every year, making law enforcement one of the most visible facets of government in people's everyday lives. Negative encounters with law enforcement can foster alienation, making participation in civic and social life less likely. High-profile incidents of police violence can spark political engagement alongside visible manifestations of public outrage over abusive policing. But daily police activities—like routine street and traffic stops and arrests for misdemeanor offenses—erode trust in vital social and civic institutions.

WHAT THE SOCIAL COSTS TO CIVIC AND SOCIAL LIFE LOOK LIKE:

Police interactions lead to a decrease in trust and engagement with critical institutions.

- People who had been arrested were less likely to vote and less likely to have trust in the government than people with no arrests, regardless of conviction.
- People with an arrest were less likely to have a bank account, more likely to be out of work or school, and less likely to obtain medical care when needed.

What are less harmful solutions?

Responding to social problems through policing is a policy choice, and arrests and other routine law enforcement activities can have negative consequences for communities. It is critical to look beyond police violence and abuses of power when considering changes to policing in the United States. Taking a holistic approach to identifying safety measures should include approaches beyond traditional law enforcement strategies. Investments and policies like youth employment programs, affordable housing, and access to health care and mental health services, as well as adding green space, street lighting, and other improvements to infrastructure and public services, can improve public safety without harmful social costs to communities.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more and access other resources, visit: https://www.vera.org/ending-mass-incarceration/criminalization-racial-disparities/public-safety/redefining-public-safety-initiative.

To read the full *Social Costs of Policing* report, visit: https://www.vera.org/publications/the-social-costs-of-policing.

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