The Effect of Direct and Vicarious Police Contact on the Educational Achievement of Urban Teens

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Abstract

In response to changes in policing practices, scholarship has increasingly begun to explore whether police contact has negative implications for youth. A small subset of scholarship has examined the implications of police contact for educational outcomes. This research has generally focused on serious police contact (arrest, court involvement, and incarceration) and has found that police contact is associated with worse educational outcomes. In this paper, we build on this research in three ways: 1) By differentiating between arrests and stops that do not result in arrest; 2) By examining the implications of vicarious police contact; and 3) By examining the pathways through which experiencing arrest, experiencing a police stop without an arrest, and vicariously experiencing police contact may impact educational achievement. Using data from the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, we find that arrest, police contact that does not result in arrest, and vicarious police contact are all associated with reductions in educational achievement. We also find that these associations are mediated at least in part by the impact of police contact on teen delinquency, teen attitudes towards teachers, and teen mental health.