

The Amplification of Deviance Following Police Contact: An Examination of Individual and Neighborhood Factors among a Sample of Youth

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Research indicates that police contact has many negative ramifications. Individuals who are stopped or arrested have fewer educational and employment opportunities, more deviant identities and attitudes, increased involvement with delinquent peers, and higher levels of delinquency. Less is known about whether these adverse consequences are universal or if they are more prevalent among some segments of the population. In this dissertation I draw on labeling theory to explore the effects of police contact for a sample of juveniles. According to labeling theory and its extensions, official labels such as those associated with police contact should lead to delinquency through three primary mechanisms: social exclusion and the attenuation of prosocial bonds, development of a deviant identity, and involvement with deviant groups. Because few studies have examined the effects of police contact on these labeling mechanisms simultaneously, this dissertation extends prior research by assessing whether the labeling process varies by race, sex, age, attitudes toward the police, and neighborhood structural characteristics.

This dissertation uses self-report data collected from a sample of 1,534 youth who participated in the National Evaluation of the Gang Resistance Education and Training (G.R.E.A.T.) program. In addition, information on the neighborhoods in which the youth reside is taken from the 2000 United States Census. Using four waves of data to ensure proper temporal ordering, path modeling is used to examine the relationship between police contact, the proposed mediators, and later delinquency. Propensity score matching is used to adjust for selection bias associated with observed characteristics.

The results indicate that the effects of police contact are consistent with labeling theory and are largely invariant across groups. Overall, youth who experience police contact are more delinquent, and this relationship is accounted for by each of the labeling mechanisms to some degree, with involvement in delinquent groups explaining the largest increases in delinquency. Police contact also retains a direct effect on delinquency, which suggests that the labeling mechanisms included in this study do not fully capture the labeling process. The results are discussed in terms of the development of labeling theory and the implications for delinquency prevention and intervention efforts.