Center For
POLICING EQUITY

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COMPOUNDING ANTI-BLACK RACIAL DISPARITIES IN POLICE STOPS

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Academic research has clearly established that disparities throughout the criminal legal system adversely affect Black people. These disparities, however, have generally been examined in isolation from each other, which obscures the cumulative manner in which they're experienced during real police interactions. Only by stepping back and considering how racially disparate policing decisions compound over the course of each officer-community member interaction can we begin to see a more comprehensive picture of the harms that inequitable policing inflicts upon Black people and communities.

The Center for Policing Equity (CPE), in its work to investigate and reduce racial disparities in policing, has produced dozens of jurisdiction-specific assessments of policing data from various types and sizes of law enforcement agencies across the country. These reports, called Justice Navigator Assessments (JNAs), reveal anti-Black disparities throughout the decisions police officers make when interacting with community members. These findings are corroborated across decades of academic research. What neither academics nor CPE have provided, until now, is an overarching picture of how the disparate outcomes from each of these various decision points compound over the course of these interactions.

CPE's white paper, "Compounding Anti-Black Racial Disparities in Police Stops," provides an overview of disparities at each of these decision points – including whom to stop and for what reason, whether to conduct a search, whether to arrest or cite drivers, and whether to use force – and illustrates how disparities at each step increase the risks of harm at subsequent decision points throughout the encounter. We focus on vehicle stops and use evidence from academic literature, a novel analysis of data from eight of the nine largest local police agencies in California between 2019 and 2022, and 20 of CPE's JNAs.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

1 **Police stop Black drivers at disproportionately high rates relative to White drivers, and more often do so for non-safety-related or pretextual reasons**, such as equipment violations or license and registration checks. Meanwhile, police stop White drivers more often for moving violations, such as speeding or running red lights.

2 **Police search Black people more often than White people once stopped, and more often do so without probable cause**, even though Black people are no more likely – and are often less likely – to be found in possession of contraband.

3 **Anti-Black disparities in stops and searches, driven by non-safety-related or pretextual stops, compound to further exacerbate disparities in use of force and other negative outcomes.** Police are more likely to conduct discretionary searches at non-safety-related stops, which disproportionately target Black people, and conducting a discretionary search is shown to greatly increase the likelihood that police will use force. Every stop has the potential to escalate into a use of force incident, and police consistently use force against Black people at disproportionately high rates.

4 **Disparate stop and search rates are not justified by any apparent public safety needs or differences in criminality between Black and White drivers.** Black drivers are released with a warning or no action taken at similar or considerably higher rates than White drivers in most jurisdictions studied, an outcome that suggests the absence of any apparent criminal activity or public safety risks.

5 **Disparate and unnecessary police contact harms communities' well-being and public safety.** Non-safety-related stops drive negative public safety outcomes – such as reduced trust in law enforcement and decreased feelings of guilt about offending – and serve as the catalyst for a sequence of compounding harms throughout the criminal legal system that disproportionately burden Black people.

6 **Depriotitizing or restricting non-safety-related stops can reduce disparities and overall harm while supporting public safety.** Ending pretextual stops has no discernible negative effect on overall crime or on traffic safety. Reducing low-level and discretionary enforcement, as well as shifting public assistance calls to non-police responders, can reduce disparities and unnecessary police contact while freeing up police resources to address more critical public safety needs.

HOW RACIALLY DISPARATE POLICING DECISIONS COMPOUND HARMS AGAINST BLACK DRIVERS

THE DECISION TO STOP

Every incidence of police contact puts community members at risk of harm throughout subsequent points in the encounter.

Police stop Black people more often than White people, and disproportionately for non-safety-related or pretextual reasons, such as equipment violations or license/registration checks. Police are also more likely to search drivers who are stopped for non-safety-related reasons.

THE DECISION TO SEARCH

Disparities in stop rates and stop reasons drive disparities in search rates.

Police search Black people more often than White people once stopped, and more often do so without probable cause, even though Black people are no more likely – and often less likely – to possess contraband. Searches increase the likelihood of a use of force incident.

THE DECISION TO USE FORCE

Disparities in search rates further compound to drive disparities in use of force rates.

Police use force against Black people at disproportionately high rates compared to White people, both at vehicle stops and in general. These disparities are not justified by differences in apparent criminality in terms of contraband discovery rates, citations, or arrests.

FURTHER CONSEQUENCES OF UNNECESSARY POLICE CONTACT:

- Fines and fees
- Risks of arrest and incarceration
- Court summons
- Increased future criminal behavior
- Increased likelihood of physical and mental health issues
- Increased negative attitudes toward police
- Reduced cooperation with law enforcement
- Reduced engagement with the labor market
- Reduced engagement with medical, financial, and educational systems

This brief and the companion white paper are available at https://policingequity.org/traffic-safety For specific guidance on policy interventions to reduce the various disparities discussed in this brief, see CPE's white paper on traffic safety and the policy interventions discussed in CPE's Justice Navigator.