

Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities

Issue Brief

Proactive Policing and Racial Bias

“Proactive policing” refers to strategies that police organizations develop and implement with the intent to prevent and reduce crime. They differ from traditional reactive approaches in policing, which focus on responding to crime once it has occurred. Proactive policing strategies—which include hot spots policing, focused deterrence, broken windows policing, stop-question-frisk, and other methods—are used widely in the United States.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine were asked to assess the application and results of proactive policing strategies—their impacts on crime, the reaction of communities, whether they are being used in a legal fashion, and whether they are applied in a discriminatory manner. The National Academies appointed a committee of criminologists, sociologists, legal scholars, and law enforcement professionals to examine the evidence.

The committee’s report, *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities* (2018), finds evidence that a number of proactive policing practices are successful in reducing crime and disorder, at least in the short term, and that most of these strategies do not harm communities’ attitudes toward police. However, the effects of proactive policing on other important outcomes—such as on the legality of police behavior and on racially biased behavior—are unclear because of gaps in research.

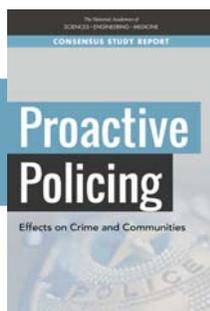
This publication highlights the report’s discussion of the interaction of racial bias and proactive policing, and identifies research needed to bring greater understanding to this topic.

RESEARCH URGENTLY NEEDED ON RACIAL BIAS IN PROACTIVE POLICING

Concerns about racial bias loom large in discussions of policing. Recent high-profile incidents of police shootings and abusive police-citizen interactions caught on camera have raised questions about basic fairness, racial discrimination, and the excessive use of force against non-Whites, and especially Blacks, in the United States.

When police target high-risk places or people, as is common in proactive policing programs, there are likely to be large racial disparities in the volume and nature of police-citizen encounters. Figuring out the role of racial animus or other factors in contributing to these disparate impacts is a challenging question for research. Existing evidence does not establish conclusively whether and to what extent racial disparities are due to each of the following factors, or to other causes:

- **Statistical prediction:** racially biased behavior that is due to individual or group predictions of behavioral outcomes. For example, statistical prediction happens in the case where there is racial bias in the choice of individuals to stop on the street because of an assessment that Blacks and Latinos have different likelihoods of carrying weapons.
- **Racial animus:** negative attitudes toward a racial or ethnic group or toward members of such a group.
- **Implicit bias:** a negative attitude or belief about race that a person may harbor without conscious awareness of it.



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Investigating the causes of these disparities is a key area for research. It is particularly important to examine the processes through which decisions about proactive policing are made at an organizational level. For example, a police agency may argue that its decision to enact a particular policy is based on racially neutral statistical prediction, but the use of specific criteria for targeting the policy may be based on implicit racial biases. An example of this may be if a proactive policing program focuses on crack cocaine, which is much more likely to be used by minority groups, as opposed to powdered cocaine, which is used more often among Whites.

A related concern is that implicit biases may affect the everyday decision making of police officers. Some proactive policing strategies have features that align with psychological risk factors for biased behavior by police officers. For example, research in social psychology suggests that implicit biases are particularly likely to emerge in situations where time is short and decisions need to be made quickly. Proactive policing strategies may put officers in situations of more frequently enforcing the law—situations that sometimes require the quick thinking

and decision making that are risk factors for the emergence of implicit biases. However, research on implicit bias in proactive policing is still evolving, and it is difficult to draw strong conclusions.

The gaps in research leave police departments and communities without an evidence base from which to make informed decisions about an issue that is one of the most important in policing today. Research on these topics is urgently needed, in particular to better understand

- police behavior in field settings that can be linked to relevant policing policies, in order to assess the extent of explicit and implicit bias in proactive policing compared to policing generally;
- how police organizations choose particular strategies and especially the focus of those strategies, in order to understand and prevent policies that are explicitly or implicitly biased against minorities; and
- whether and to what extent training programs for police can reduce implicit or explicit biases in proactive policing, and whether these translate into behavioral changes in the field.

COMMITTEE ON PROACTIVE POLICING: EFFECTS ON CRIME, COMMUNITIES, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

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For More Information . . . This Consensus Study Report Highlights was prepared by the Committee on Law and Justice based on the Consensus Study Report *Proactive Policing: Effects on Crime and Communities* (2018). The study was sponsored by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the National Institute of Justice of the U.S. Department of Justice, and with additional support from the National Academy of Sciences President’s Fund. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the views of any organization or agency that provided support for the project. Copies of the Consensus Study Report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu/proactivepolicing>.

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