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Contact and Context: How Municipal Traffic Stops Shape Citizen Character

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Previous research shows that how the state conducts itself influences citizen attitudes and behaviors through direct and proximal contact; we show the actions of state agents ripple out even further. Joining bureaucratic data on a publicly observable state behavior—racial disparities in investigatory traffic stops—with survey data, this article shows that residing in a place with extreme racial disparities in traffic stops is associated with depressed confidence in the police even in the absence of more direct forms of contact. This relationship does not extend to participatory behaviors, however, in which only personal stop history and proximal contact are predictors. Racially disparate policing practices, then, may undermine law enforcement legitimacy in a community as a whole, but mobilization to change policy appears limited to individuals who more directly experience the carceral state.

John Stuart Mill and Jean-Jacques Rousseau posited that citizens are not born but made: forged by the state into the actors they are taught to become (see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, for a review). Scholarly descendants since have shown that people learn from the state about the purpose of government and their role within it. From a series of groundbreaking works, we know that direct interactions with the American welfare and carceral states shape citizen trust, efficacy, and political involvement (e.g., Lerman and Weaver 2014; Mettler 2005; Michener 2018; Soss 2000) and that these effects can spiral outward (Burch 2013; Walker 2020). In this article, we argue that racially disparate, publicly observable policing practices also shape citizen attitudes toward the state, above and beyond more direct experiences. Our focus is on the degree of racial disparities in investigatory traffic stops, a statistic that varies across municipalities and represents a publicly observable state action. Citizens who are not the target of these

state interventions can still observe them, and through such public actions, municipal police forces may develop reputations that shape political behavior.

We merge bureaucratic records on police stops in Illinois and North Carolina with individual-level survey data on direct interactions with the police, proximal carceral contact, evaluations of police quality, and political participation. This unique data set allows us to test the relationship between contextual-level state behavior and individual-level attitudes, net personal and proximal contact. We find that racial disparities in police behavior are indeed associated with citizen attitudes. Living in a municipality with the most anti-Black policing behavior compared to one with racially equal investigatory stops is associated with a similar decay in police trust as being stopped three or more times by law enforcement in recent years compared to those who have not been stopped. This substantively large relationship, though, is limited to institution-specific

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This study was conducted in compliance with relevant laws and was approved by the institutional review boards at Vanderbilt University and the University of Oklahoma. Funding for the Race and Carceral State Survey was provided by Vanderbilt University and the University of Oklahoma. Replication files are available in the *JOP* Dataverse (<https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/jop>). The empirical analysis has been successfully replicated by the *JOP* replication analyst. An appendix with supplementary material is available at <https://doi.org/10.1086/719274>.

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attitudes. Looking at both voting and nonvoting acts, we find that racial disparities in police behavior have no relationship to political engagement. The results suggest that while the public choices of state actors can shift perceptions of legitimacy, it is direct and proximal contact that ultimately influence democratic behavior. A causal test of this relationship is beyond the scope of this article, but our documentation of the descriptive relationship between policing practices and perceptions of legitimacy should encourage more scholarly attention to this topic.

STATE CHARACTER, CITIZEN CHARACTER

In the early twenty-first century, a series of trailblazing books asked how state contact influences citizens. Scholars showed that recipients of benefits programs learn about the purpose of government via interactions (Mettler 2005; Michener 2018; Soss 2000). These interactions can foster increased political efficacy and participation, but they can also have nefarious effects. If perceived as procedurally unfair, interacting with justice-enforcing institutions like the police, jails, prisons, courts, and probation officers can train people to fear the government and withdraw from politics (Davis 2021; Justice and Meares 2014; Lerman and Weaver 2014; Tyler 2004; White 2019b). These direct interactions also influence loved ones (Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2019; Bowers and Preuhs 2009; Lee, Porter, and Comfort 2014; Walker 2020; Walker and García-Castañón 2017; White 2019a) and, if large enough, can alter voting patterns for entire neighborhoods and social groups (Burch 2013, 2014; Maltby 2017).

We ask: Can the public behaviors of state officials teach citizen observers more broadly about the nature of the state and their role within it, even without direct experience? We propose that when state actors engage in publicly observable actions like traffic stops, citizens can learn about institutional legitimacy, quality, and responsiveness even without direct or proximal contact. Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel (2014, 24) suggest traffic stops are frequently witnessed by other drivers and define racial meaning in the eyes of the public. Others show public opinion is sensitive to rising incarceration rates (Muller and Schrage 2014). Responses to policing practices, which are both more visible and more localized, should induce widespread learning. Such learning may take place gradually over many years and be assisted by local media coverage, interpersonal communication, or social justice advocates. As state actors develop a reputation for engaging in practices perceived as procedurally unfair, trust in political institutions should fall (Tyler 2004), and this may shape whether individuals withdraw from political life (Lerman and Weaver 2014) or engage to change the system (Walker 2020). Given the importance of context to the development of

political attitudes (e.g., Michener 2013), this relationship might be substantial.

Our focus is on investigatory traffic stops, or those designed to bring an officer into contact with a person of interest rather than simply to enforce traffic safety (Epp et al. 2014). Much like their pedestrian cousin, “stop, question, frisk,” these controversial policing practices happen in public spaces and in ways that are often perceived as highly invasive and procedurally unfair (Meares 2014; Mummolo 2018). Racial disparities in these stops then may teach municipal residents more broadly that the state is an institution of (unjust) punishment (Lerman and Weaver 2013).

MEASURING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND COMMUNITY CONTEXT

To test this, we merge individual-level survey data from a sample of Black and White Americans who live in North Carolina and Illinois with bureaucratic records on policing. In these two states, officers are mandated to document the circumstances of their stops, including why the stop was made, the driver’s race/ethnicity, and the stop’s outcome. These bureaucratic data, which span 2002–16 for North Carolina and 2004–14 for Illinois, allow us to identify patterns in police behavior over time in a way that we expect is observable to residents and contributes to the reputation of the police force. We merge these data with our survey, fielded from May 11 to June 13, 2017, by Survey Sampling International, using zip codes. The data set includes 893 respondents spread across 384 municipalities.¹

As our primary independent variable, we calculate the percentage of total stops in each municipality that are investigatory (i.e., the initial purpose is related to vehicular equipment, registration issues, or a seat belt violation) for Black and White drivers separately.² The rate of Black investigatory stops is then divided by the rate of White investigatory stops for each municipality, producing a ratio measure that indicates the degree of racial disparity for this type of stop. We subtract 1 from this ratio so that values below 0 indicate that a police department is more likely to stop White drivers for investigatory reasons and values above 0 indicate a disparity in the direction of Black drivers. The measure ranges from –1 to 1.48.

1. This data collection effort was part of a national opt-in online survey of roughly 12,000 respondents (Anoll and Israel-Trummel 2017). Our analytical approach allows us to examine the average effect of police practices across municipalities in these states, but we are not able to estimate the relationship within a singular municipality.

2. This is in contrast to stops more clearly related to safety (e.g., speeding, running a red light, driving erratically) and is informed by existing work (Baumgartner, Epp, and Shoub 2018; Epp et al. 2014).

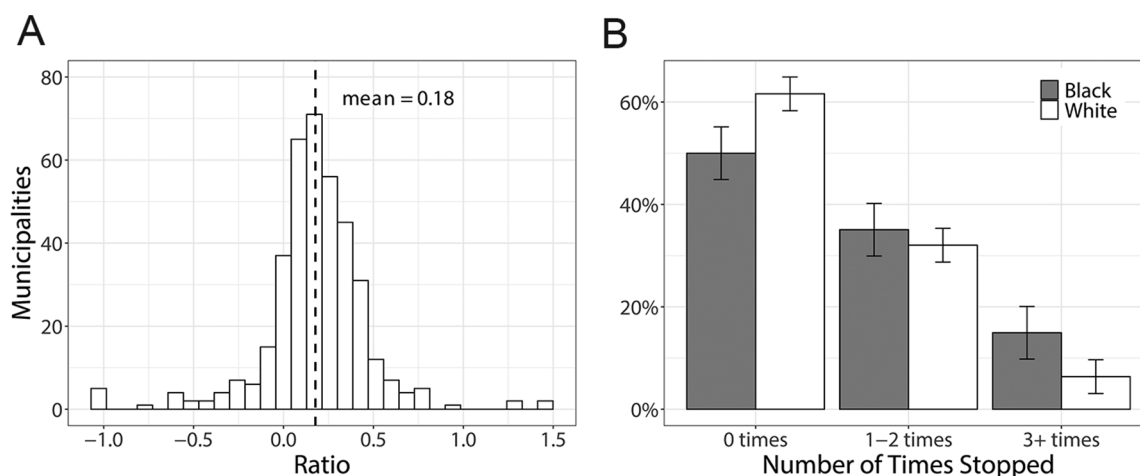


Figure 1. Distributions of independent variables: A, investigatory stops ratio; B, survey: stopped by police.

Our use of this measure is informed by empirical and theoretical considerations. Theoretically, we propose it indicates municipalities where racial disparities in policing are widespread. Disparities in invasive police practices are thought to bundle together (Carbado 2017; Roach et al. 2020); therefore, our measure is best imagined as a proxy for a broader environment of disparities including invasive, street-level—and hence observable—policing practices. Empirically, its construction sidesteps the need to identify the underlying (and unknown) population of motorists, by examining a subset of stops from total stops for each racial group.

Figure 1A shows the distribution of the investigatory stops ratio across the 384 municipalities in our sample. The mean of 0.18 indicates that, on average, investigatory stops are more common for Black drivers than for White across municipalities. Municipalities with the greatest disparities include both rural and urban locations as well as municipalities that are majority White and majority Black.³ In our sample, 92% of respondents live in municipalities where investigatory stops are more likely to target Black motorists.

Figure 1B shows the distribution of personal stops separately for Black and White respondents. Respondents were asked how frequently they had been stopped and questioned by police in the past five years. We plot the percentage of each group that reports zero, one to two, and three plus stops, with 80% confidence intervals to visually indicate a two-sample *t*-test. Racial disparities in interactions with the police are evident. Sixty-two percent of Whites in these two states report no contact with the police in the last five years, compared to 50% of Black respondents (Welch's *t*-test, $p = .00$). In contrast,

3. Five small towns populated almost entirely with White people account for the -1 values.

15% of Black compared to only 6% of White respondents report three or more stops (Welch's *t*-test, $p = .00$).

We test the relationship between these measures and evaluations of police performance and political activity. Respondents were asked how good of a job the police are doing to solve crime, protect people like you from violent crime, treat racial and ethnic groups equally, not use excessive force on suspects, and hold officers accountable for misconduct (Ekins 2016). We index these measures to create a scale from 0 to 20, where larger numbers indicate more positive evaluations ($\alpha = 0.923$). Two measures capture political participation: self-reported voter turnout in 2016 and an index of nonvoting participatory acts.⁴ Given the small number of highly active respondents, we pool those who performed three or more acts together so that the index ranges from 0 to 3. Considering extant work documenting the effects of proximal contact on participation (e.g., Walker 2020), we include a measure of close social ties to people with a felony conviction as well as controls for crime victim status, felony conviction status, gender, income, education, age, ideology, and race (see the appendix for question wordings).

RESULTS

We use mixed effects linear regressions—models that incorporate both fixed and random effects—which account for the nested nature of our data where respondents are located in both states and zip codes (Bates et al. 2015).⁵ Table 1 shows the

4. In the past year did you attend a community meeting, contact an official, donate money to a candidate or organization, volunteer for a campaign, sign a petition, or attend a protest?

5. Tables A2 and A3 show that our results are not model dependent. They replicate in ordinary least squares models and when using zip-level correlates rather than random effects.

Table 1. Policing Context and Personal Stop History on Views of Police and Participation

	Evaluation of Police	Turnout	Participatory Acts
Intercept	6.70 (.74)*	.49 (.06)*	.69 (.17)*
% investigatory stops ratio	-1.01 (.37)*	-.02 (.03)	-.08 (.08)
Stopped 1-2 times	-.78 (.37)*	-.00 (.03)	.28 (.08)*
Stopped 3+ times	-1.19 (.64) ⁺	.11 (.05)*	.20 (.14)
Proximal carceral contact	-1.05 (.25)*	-.01 (.02)	.13 (.06)*
Controls	✓	✓	✓
Akaike information criterion	4,530.34	810.83	2,272.15
Bayesian information criterion	4,604.58	885.07	2,346.39
Log likelihood	-2,249.17	-389.41	-1,120.08

Note. Mixed linear regressions with random effects for state and zip code. Standard errors in parentheses. $N = 765$; sample size reflects incomplete data on some covariates. Full data are in table A1.

⁺ $p < .10$.

* $p < .05$.

results for our three dependent variables. People stopped one or two times by the police in the last five years are less positive in their evaluations of law enforcement compared to those who report never being stopped ($\beta = -0.78, p = .04$), as are those reporting three or more stops ($\beta = -1.19, p = .06$). Proximal contact with the carceral state—measured here as close ties to people with felony convictions—is also negatively related to evaluations of the police ($\beta = -1.05, p = .00$). Independent of direct and proximal contact, variation in municipal police behavior is associated with evaluations of law enforcement. As anti-Black racial disparities in investigatory stops increase, evaluations of police performance fall ($\beta = -1.01, p = .01$). People who live in the most anti-Black policing contexts are expected to evaluate the police 1.50 points more negatively than those in municipalities that have racially equal investigatory stops. The size of this effect is nearly double the change in evaluations of law enforcement among those who have not been stopped compared to those stopped one or two times and larger than the expected decline of 1.05 points for those who have one close social tie with a felony conviction compared to those with zero.

This relationship is not driven by Black respondents. In robustness tests (tables A4 and A5), the negative effect of racial bias in investigatory police stops persists when analyzing Whites separately, while the effect of the police stops ratio is negative but insignificant among Black respondents—perhaps due to sample size ($N = 275$). That we do not find divergent effects of policing context by race is surprising, given how racial inequalities in other components of the carceral state affect the attitudes of Black residents more so than White (Maltby 2017). We further interrogate these results by

dropping municipalities with few stops (tables A11–A13) and by using alternative specifications of our investigatory stops measure (tables A9 and A10). Throughout, the association between police behavior and evaluations of police quality persists.⁶ These results suggest that when the state engages in racially biased actions, it undermines the legitimacy and perceived quality of its agents, and not just among those bearing the brunt of disparate treatment.

Next, we turn to political participation. Disparities in police behavior may create a mobilizing effect in which people respond to perceived injustice through political action (e.g., Walker 2020), a demobilizing effect in which a racially discriminatory environment depresses political involvement (e.g., Lerman and Weaver 2014), or have no direct effect, with the impact of racially disparate police practices influencing only political attitudes and not behavior. Table 1 shows that municipal-level racial disparities in investigatory traffic stops are not associated with participation. Additional tests confirm this is the case for both racial groups (tables A4 and A5). Personal stop history, however, shows a positive and significant association with political involvement. Those experiencing three or more stops in the last five years are 11 percentage points more likely to vote than their counterparts with no individual-level contact ($p = .04$); people stopped one or two times in preceding years complete on average 0.28 additional acts ($p = .00$), an effect robust for Black and White Americans when analyzed separately (tables A4 and

6. We also test whether there is an interactive relationship between policing practices and personal or proximal contact and find none (tables A6–A8).

A5). Finally, those with the most proximal contact are expected to perform an additional 0.27 acts ($p = .02$), although this variable has no relationship to voting.

CONCLUSION

Citizens become less willing to provide aid for criminal investigations, report victimization, and support law enforcement funding when the perceived legitimacy of police deteriorates (Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo, and Rand 2019; Tyler 2004). Our results suggest that when municipal police forces engage in observable, racially disparate policing practices such as investigatory traffic stops, their perceived legitimacy declines. It does so not just among those with direct or proximal contact but in the community as a whole. Our evidence is observational, but it makes a vital first step in documenting how policing context, not just contact, might erode institutional legitimacy. In establishing this relationship, we lay the groundwork for others to investigate the exact conditions and mechanisms surrounding these results.

Racial disparities in police behavior are related to institution-specific attitudes, but we also show they do not predict participation. Rather, only personal and proximal contact are associated with these behaviors. The mobilizing effect of proximal contact is well documented (Walker 2020), but the positive relationship between direct contact and formal participation contrasts with previous scholarship (e.g., Lerman and Weaver 2014). One explanation is that opportunities to mobilize around this issue have increased substantially as the Black Lives Matter movement has proliferated. Data from before the movement's inception or during its early years may miss how organizers are increasingly ushering those with negative experiences into politics to challenge aggressive policing practices.

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