




Attitudes Towards Police and Weapon Carriage Among Adolescents

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Abstract

While much is known about attitudes towards police and weapon carriage independently, it is unclear whether the two are associated. In the current study, we explored this potential association and whether it was moderated by race in a sample of adolescents.

Efforts to build positive community-police relationships may be an effective strategy for reducing weapon carriage and ultimately, injury and fatality.

Keywords Weapon carrying · Youth · Violence · Police

Introduction

Violence and homicide are among the leading causes of death for youth, and the leading cause of death for African American youth (Cunningham et al., 2018; National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, 2016). Indeed, research consistently demonstrates that violent victimization is not random, and disproportionately impacts youth and young adults in small segments within urban locations (Papachristos et al., 2015). Beyond these aggregate differences in the risk of violent victimization by race and location, evidence consistently demonstrates that individual level behaviors and risk factors further magnify the risk of serious victimization (see Turanovic & Pratt, 2019). Youth weapon carriage, particularly firearms, is a

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persistent risk factor for injury and death, and is associated with interpersonal violence and injuries requiring hospitalization (Carter et al., 2013). Youth who carry firearms are 1.5 times more likely to be victimized (Spano et al., 2008). In combination with other risk behaviors like substance use, weapon carrying can increase the odds of firearm victimization by 9.9 times (Dong et al., 2017).

Research on individual-level factors (e.g., gender, age, race) associated with weapon carriage has consistently demonstrated a higher level of carrying among males, adolescents, and young adults. Evidence also shows that Black persons carry weapons at a higher rate than Whites (Felson & Pare, 2010). Consistent patterns associated with factors that are modifiable, however, is more limited. For instance, researchers have suggested that weapon carrying is the result of an honor culture (Felson & Pare, 2010), in response to the threat of victimization—referred to as the fear and victimization hypothesis (e.g., Melde et al., 2009) or adversary effects (Felson & Pare, 2010)—and as part of a deviant social identity (Fagan & Wilkinson, 1998), with inconsistent results (Li et al., 2021).

The current study seeks to expand the literature on modifiable factors associated with weapon carrying by examining the association between attitudes towards the police and youth weapon carriage. Theory and research suggests that those with more negative views of the police, or who feel the legal system is not a viable option for resolving disputes, will resort to “self-help” strategies to avoid victimization, including carrying weapons (e.g., Anderson, 1999; Black, 1983; Felson & Pare, 2010; Stewart et al., 2008). We discuss the literature on risk factors for weapon carrying, factors associated with attitudes toward the police, as well as the theoretical reasons for expecting an inverse relationship between attitudes toward the police and weapon carrying. We also discuss the potential unique effect of attitudes toward the police on weapon carrying among black youth in urban social contexts. Evidence on modifiable factors associated with youth weapon carriage will allow researchers and practitioners to develop solutions to reduce weapon carriage, and ultimately violence victimization.

Youth Weapon Carriage

Researchers have studied several individual and contextual factors related to youth weapon carriage (Oliphant et al., 2019). Gender, age, aggression, substance use, victimization, and race are among the commonly studied factors associated with weapon carrying among youth. Males are more likely to carry firearms than females (Carter et al., 2013; Chen & Wu, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2010), but knife carriage does not vary by gender (Cunningham et al., 2010). Older adolescents are more likely to carry a firearm compared to younger adolescents (Cunningham et al., 2010; Hemenway et al., 1996). Engagement in aggressive behavior, including fighting and endorsement of aggressive attitudes, is positively associated with carrying a firearm, razor, and knife (Carter et al., 2013; Cunningham et al., 2010; Whiteside et al., 2015). Youth who reported using alcohol, drugs, or tobacco are more likely to report carrying a gun or knife (Carter et al., 2013; Chen & Wu, 2016; Cunningham et al., 2010; Simon et al., 1997). Previous experiences of violent victimization are

also associated with increased likelihood of weapon carriage (Cunningham et al., 2010; Spano & Bolland, 2013). Researchers have reported conflicting evidence on the association between race and weapon carriage. Cunningham and colleagues (2010) found that Black youth are more likely to carry firearms while non-Black youth tended to carry knives (Cunningham et al., 2010). Other studies have also suggested that Blacks as well as Latinos are more likely than White individuals to carry a weapon (DuRant et al., 1999; Kingery et al., 1996; Wilcox & Clayton, 2001; Wilcox et al., 2006). Oliphant et al. (2019), however, noted in a recent review that White youth are more likely to carry firearms in rural settings than Black youth and the opposite is true in urban settings (Oliphant et al., 2019).

Individual-level and other contributing risks are multi-faceted and interact across ecological levels. Although risks are well established for individual-level indicators, less research has been done on the context(s) in which youth live. Contextual factors associated with weapon carriage include perceptions of community-level violence and safety (Hemenway et al., 1996), perceived firearm prevalence in the community (Cook & Ludwig, 2004; Hemenway et al., 2011), and physical and social disorder in local neighborhoods (Molnar et al., 2004).

Given that many youth include personal safety among their reasons for weapons carriage (Bergstein et al., 1996; Wilkinson et al., 2009), trust in law enforcement has the potential to assuage some concerns about the likelihood of victimization and, subsequently, weapons carriage. Yet deep-rooted social experience and negative interaction with law enforcement in communities of color, particularly in Black communities, may mean that the same does not hold true for all youth (Brunson & Weitzer, 2008; Mastrofski et al., 2002).

Attitudes Towards the Police

Attitudes towards the police are influenced by several factors. Being female and prior victimization, for example, are related to positive attitudes about the police (Brick et al., 2009; Hurst & Frank, 2000; Wu et al., 2015). Researchers have reported persistent differences across race regarding attitudes towards the police, with African Americans expressing substantially less confidence in the police than Whites (e.g., Walker et al., 2000). Neighborhood safety is also associated with attitudes towards the police, such that people who feel less safe in their neighborhood are more likely to view the police negatively (Reisig & Parks, 2000; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005). This suggests that public confidence in the police depends, in part, on perceptions regarding the effectiveness of police in fighting crime. Previous contact with the police also affects attitudes towards the police. Negative and positive encounters with the police shape individual's attitudes and beliefs about police legitimacy and effectiveness. Researchers examining the relationship between perceptions and the context of citizens' interactions with police found that negative perceptions of the police arise from negative (involuntary and voluntary) police contacts (Brandt & Markus, 2000). For instance, in their examination of perceptions of racial profiling, Weitzer & Tuch (2002) discovered that race and personal experience with racial profiling are among the strongest and most consistent predictors of attitudes toward the police.

They concluded that direct experience with racial discrimination can have enduring, detrimental effects on individuals' perceptions of the police (Weitzer & Tuch, 2002).

Researchers have reported that young Black males bear the largest share of negative experiences with police. That is, they are more likely to face disproportionate experiences with surveillance and stops, disrespectful treatment, arrests, and excessive and deadly use of force (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Huebner et al., 2004; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Areas characterized by concentrated poverty and racial segregation are subject to aggressive policing strategies, including drug and gang suppression efforts, greater use of stop-and-frisk procedures, higher levels of police misconduct, and under-responsive policing (Bass, 2001; Kane, 2002; Klinger, 1997). Aggressive policing disproportionately targets African Americans (Bass, 2001), which, in turn, undermines relations between police and minority communities. This has serious implications, because citizen distrust of the police can strain police-community relations, as police typically depend on cooperation from the public to solve crimes, and residents are more likely to cooperate when they view the police with legitimacy (Decker, 1981; Kochel, 2018).

Black (1983) suggested that violent forms of self-help are more likely in communities that feel legal responses to conflict are not available, or ineffective. To the extent that communities of color feel as though the police are not a viable solution, or are ineffective, in resolving disputes, one might expect higher rates of weapon carrying to occur as a means of protecting oneself from victimization. Anderson (1999) described a similar process in his work on the *code of the streets*, where he suggested that in poor, high crime, inner-city communities "there is a generalized belief that the police simply do not care about Black people, that when a crime is committed in the Black community, little notice will be taken" (p. 321). Thus, residents of such communities are left with a choice. They can avoid risky situations and contexts, or they can arm themselves with instruments that either serve to deter conflict or limit the threat of serious victimization should interpersonal disputes occur. Felson & Pare (2010) found evidence of such an honor culture, particularly among Blacks in the U.S., who were more likely to carry weapons than whites, controlling for their risk of victimization.

As police-involved deaths continue to disproportionately affect communities of color (Edwards et al., 2019), youth may also feel the need to carry a weapon in order to protect themselves from police violence. Alternatively, reduced trust in the police may make citizens less inclined to contact police when the need arises, and weapons are carried as a way of compensating for the lack of security. Relatedly, it is also possible that youth are carrying weapons to protect themselves in the face of understaffed police departments that are slow to respond. Much is to be learned about possible consequences of lack of trust in police.

While much is known about predictors of weapon carriage and attitudes towards police in youth independently, limited research on the association between weapon carriage and attitudes towards the police has been reported. In the current study, we sought to explore whether attitudes towards the police was associated with weapon carriage and if this association was moderated by race. Our study took place in Flint, MI and is particularly salient for this research because in 2017, Flint had the fewest police officers per 50,000 residents, one of the nation's highest violent crime rates,

and the longest response times for 911 calls in the United States (Adams, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). Consequently, we tested two hypotheses. First, given that safety concerns are associated with both weapon carriage and negative perceptions of the police, we predict that attitudes towards the police will be negatively associated with weapon carriage. That is, youth with more negative attitudes towards the police will be more likely to report carrying a weapon. Second, building on the work of Felson and Pare (2010), we expect that the relationship between police attitudes and weapon carriage will be moderated by race, whereby Black youth with more negative attitudes towards the police will be more likely to report carrying a weapon than non-Black youth with similar attitudes.

Method

Participants and Procedures

Data for the current study were derived from the Safe School Transitions Study (SSTS), a mixed-methods project on the experiences of youth as they transitioned from elementary schools within the Flint Community Schools (FCS) to middle and high schools located in and around Flint, MI. At the time of the study, FCS was in the process of a phased shut down of the lone remaining traditional 9th-12th grade high school, which left a single public high school that contained a student body between the 7th and 12th grades. Therefore, from the beginning of the project the majority of students in the district began attending the remaining public high school beginning in 7th grade. Because the overall project was focused upon the school transition experiences of students in the district, the sample was drawn from classrooms housing students in fifth through eighth grades, as these grades were within two academic years (pre and post) of their transition to high school. After gaining approval from the district superintendent to engage in the study, the principals of all 10 eligible schools (8 elementary and 2 high schools) in FCS were contacted and 8 (7 elementary and 1 high school) agreed to allow their students to participate. The high school that did not participate in the study was in the process of shutting down at the time of the study and is now closed. In all, 27 of the 32 eligible classrooms across grades 5 through 8 in the 8 participating schools agreed to participate. All 5 non-participating classrooms were eighth grade.

Members of the research team conducted site visits and spoke with teachers and staff in order to address questions and elicit their cooperation in conducting the study. Active parental consent was required given the age of the sample, and thus we utilized the protocol described by Esbensen et al. (2008) to garner parental consent. First, teachers were incentivized to help in both encouraging students to return their parental consent forms and then collecting the forms as students brought them to campus. Teachers were provided with \$2.00 for every signed consent form returned, whether or not the parent allowed for their child's participation (i.e., we sought active parental consent or refusal on the form). We also provided an additional \$10.00 bonus if their classroom return rate reached 70 percent, \$15.00 if it reached 80 percent, or \$20.00 if it reached 90 percent. Universally, teachers utilized this money to purchase supplies

for the classroom. Second, students who returned a signed form were provided a lanyard, which could hold their student ID or keys. Akin to the process for teachers, the students received the lanyard whether or not their parents or guardians provided permission for them to participate. The final active consent rate was just over 45 percent (329 active consents from 730 eligible students). Five percent of eligible students returned a signed parental consent form indicating their parents refused their participation, and roughly 50 percent of youth failed to return a signed form. Twenty-seven students with active parental consent could not be located at the time of the survey, leading to a final sample of 302 participants (41% response rate). No eighth grade students participated in the study. The grade distribution of the final sample was 85 fifth graders, 110 sixth graders, and 107 seventh graders.

Trained researchers administered the surveys in the classroom setting to ensure consistent data collection processes were adhered to, consistent with IRB protocols. Each question was read out loud to all participants to limit issues with reading comprehension and to help participants maintain focus on completing the survey in a timely fashion. Students who did not participate in the study worked quietly at their desks, usually on homework or reading assignments. Teachers remained in the classroom during survey administration in order to assist students not taking the survey and to maintain classroom order, but were not allowed to help students taking the survey, so as to maintain confidentiality. Surveys were completed within a 45-min class period.

Sample

The total sample (see Table 1) included 147 boys (49%) and 154 girls (51%). They ranged in age from 10 to 14 years with a mean age of 11.83 ($SD=1.13$). Study participants were racially/ethnically diverse, with 60% reporting as Black, 13% as non-Hispanic White, 17% mixed race, and smaller proportions identifying as Hispanic, Native American, Asian, or other racial and ethnic groups. Due to missing data, demographic characteristics of our ultimate analysis sample after listwise deletion ($n=251$) is also presented in Table 1. The demographic characteristics of the analysis sample is nearly identical to the total sample.

Measures

Weapon Carriage Weapon carriage was measured based on responses to two self-reported delinquency items indicating having carried a weapon in the respondent's past (Esbensen, et al., 2013). Respondents were asked if they had ever carried a hidden weapon for protection (15%) or attacked someone with a weapon (5%). Each item was measured dichotomously (0 = No, 1 = Yes) and youth who answered yes to at least one item were coded as having carried a weapon (15%).¹ See Appendix A for a full delineation of all items included in the study.

¹ In a few cases, youth reported having carried a weapon and listed items that were not weapons (e.g., hands or pencils). If they did not respond yes to the item about attacking someone with a weapon, they were recoded to the non-weapon carrying group.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all study variables

	Total sample (<i>n</i> = 302)	Analysis sample (<i>n</i> = 251)	Weapon carriage (<i>n</i> = 38)	No weapon carriage (<i>n</i> = 213)	<i>p</i> value Weapon vs. No Weapon
Age, M (SD)	11.84 (1.13)	11.83 (1.11)	12.12 (1.05)	11.78 (1.12)	.11
Gender, <i>n</i> (%)					.000 ***
Male	147 (51.2)	118 (47.0)	28 (73.7)	90 (42.2)	
Female	154 (48.8)	133 (53.0)	10 (7.5)	123 (92.5)	
Race, <i>n</i> (%)					.95
Black/African American	177 (60.0)	147 (58.6)			
White, non-Hispanic	38 (12.9)	36 (14.3)			
Hispanic/Latino	9 (3.1)	8 (3.2)			
Indian/Native American	16 (5.4)	14 (5.6)			
Asian/Pacific Islander	2 (.7)	2 (.8)			
Other	3 (1.0)	3 (1.2)			
Mixed Race—including Black	45 (14.9)	37 (14.7)			
Mixed Race—not including Black	5 (1.7)	4 (1.6)			
Attitudes towards the police, M (SD)	3.28 (1.05)	3.30 (1.04)	2.70 (1.19)	3.41 (.98)	.000 ***
By Race	<i>p</i> = .01*	<i>p</i> = .02*	<i>p</i> = .01**	<i>p</i> = .17	
Non-Black	3.55 (.99)	3.56 (.99)	3.58 (1.16)	3.56 (.97)	.96
Black	3.18 (1.05)	3.21 (1.05)	2.38 (1.05)	3.35 (.98)	.000 ***
Perceived risk of victimization, M (SD)	1.54 (.71)	1.56 (.73)	1.75 (.80)	1.52 (.72)	.09
Victimization, <i>n</i> (%)					
School	170 (56.3)	158 (63.0)	30 (79.0)	128 (60.1)	.03 *
Outside of school	184 (60.9)	169 (67.3)	33 (86.8)	136 (63.9)	.01 *

p* < 0.05, *p* < 0.01, ****p* < 0.001

Attitudes Towards the Police Attitudes towards the police were measured using ten items that used a 5-point Likert response (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Six attitudinal items were taken from Hurst & Frank (2000) (e.g., “In general, I trust the police” and “The police do a good job of stopping crime”); three items about interaction with police came from Brandt & Markus (2000) (e.g., “I feel comfortable talking with police officers in my school”); and a final item, “I feel safer when police officers are in my school,” came from the G.R.E.A.T. Evaluation (Esbensen, et al., 2013). All ten items were averaged. This scale displayed strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Perceived Risk of Victimization Respondent subjective assessments of their likelihood of being victimized were drawn from a scale adapted from the second national evaluation of the G.R.E.A.T. program. It includes six items about the perceived likelihood of being attacked or bullied at school or outside of school on a scale of 1–5 (1 = not at all likely, 5 = very likely). The Cronbach alpha for this scale as 0.83.

Victimization Victimization was measured using 9 items about school-based victimization and 12 items about neighborhood victimization from the Juvenile Victimization Questionnaire: 2nd Revision (Hamby et al., 2011). Items asked about whether participants had been victimized at any time in their life, including property crime, threats, harassment, and physical violence. School-based victimization and neighborhood victimization variables were created separately. For each variable, all of the items were summed and then the variable was dichotomized such that 0 = no reported victimization and 1 = at least one incident of victimization. The Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 coefficient for school victimization was 0.70 and neighborhood victimization was 0.59.

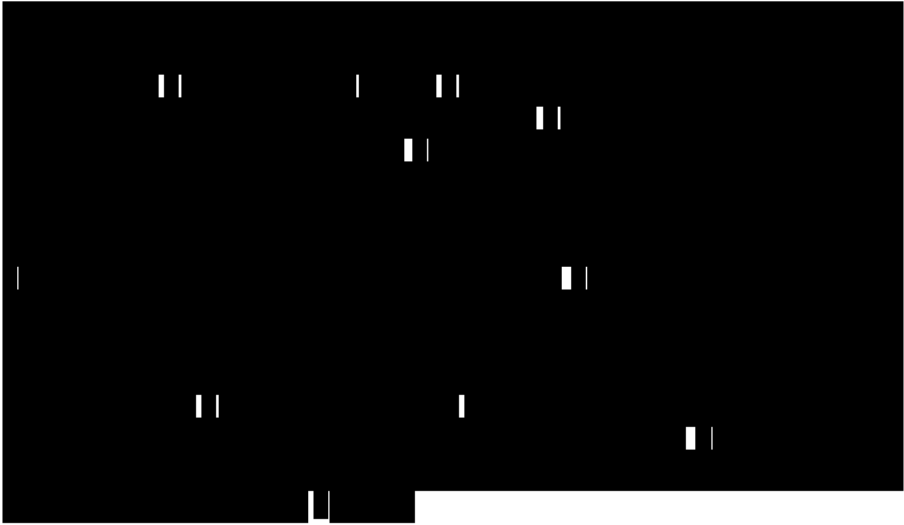
Demographics Age, gender, and race were also included in analyses. Gender response options were male and female. Race response options included White/Anglo, not Hispanic; Black/African-American; Hispanic/Latino; American Indian/Native American; Asian/Pacific Islander; and Other. Given the distribution of race responses in the sample, we created a dichotomous race variable that included those who identified as Black (58%) and everyone else including mixed race identified individuals as Non-Black (42%) for all analyses.

Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics were calculated using tabulations as well as t-tests and chi-square analysis to test for significance in differences between groups. In preparation for analyses, we first mean-centered attitudes towards police. We examined the relationship between attitudes towards police and weapon carriage using logistic regression, controlling for age, race, gender, victimization, and perceived risk of victimization. Next, we tested the interaction between race and attitudes towards the police to examine whether the association between attitudes towards the police and weapon carriage was moderated by race using the same control variables. We assessed model fit using a number of metrics, including pseudo R^2 , the Hosmer–Lemeshow

chi-square (10 groups) test of model fit, and area under the curve (AUC) statistics. AUC, in particular, allowed us to determine if inclusion of the interaction term improved the fit of the model to the data. Analyses were conducted using Stata 14.²

Results



Main Effects



Moderation (Interaction) Effects



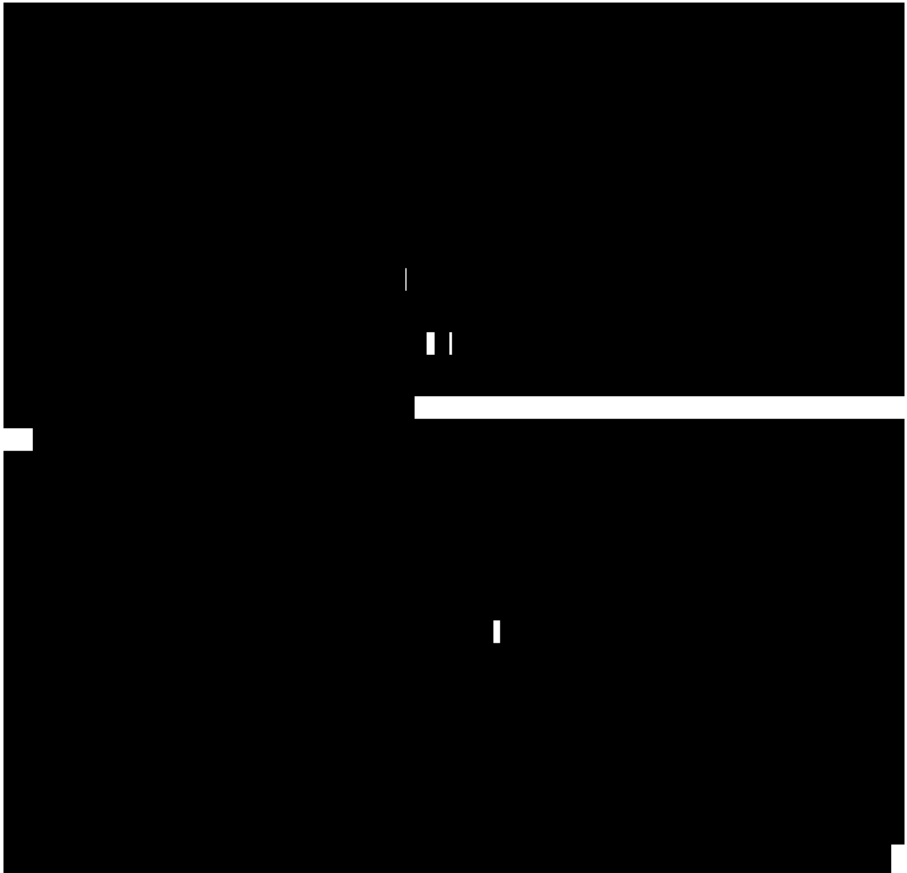
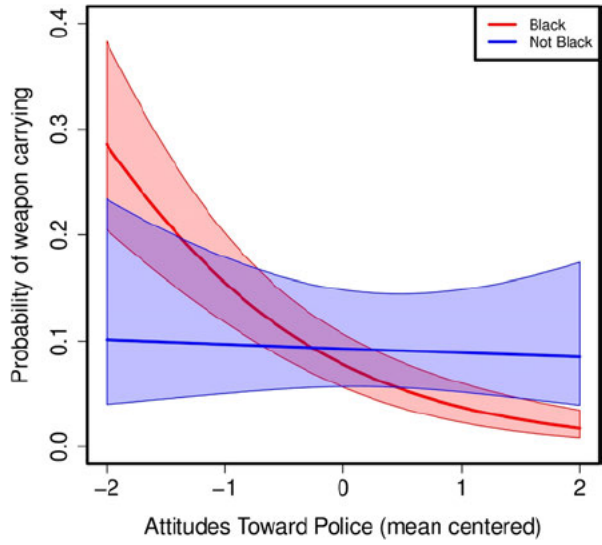
² Stata code for all analyses is available by request from the corresponding author.

Table 2 Logistic regression results for predicting weapon carriage

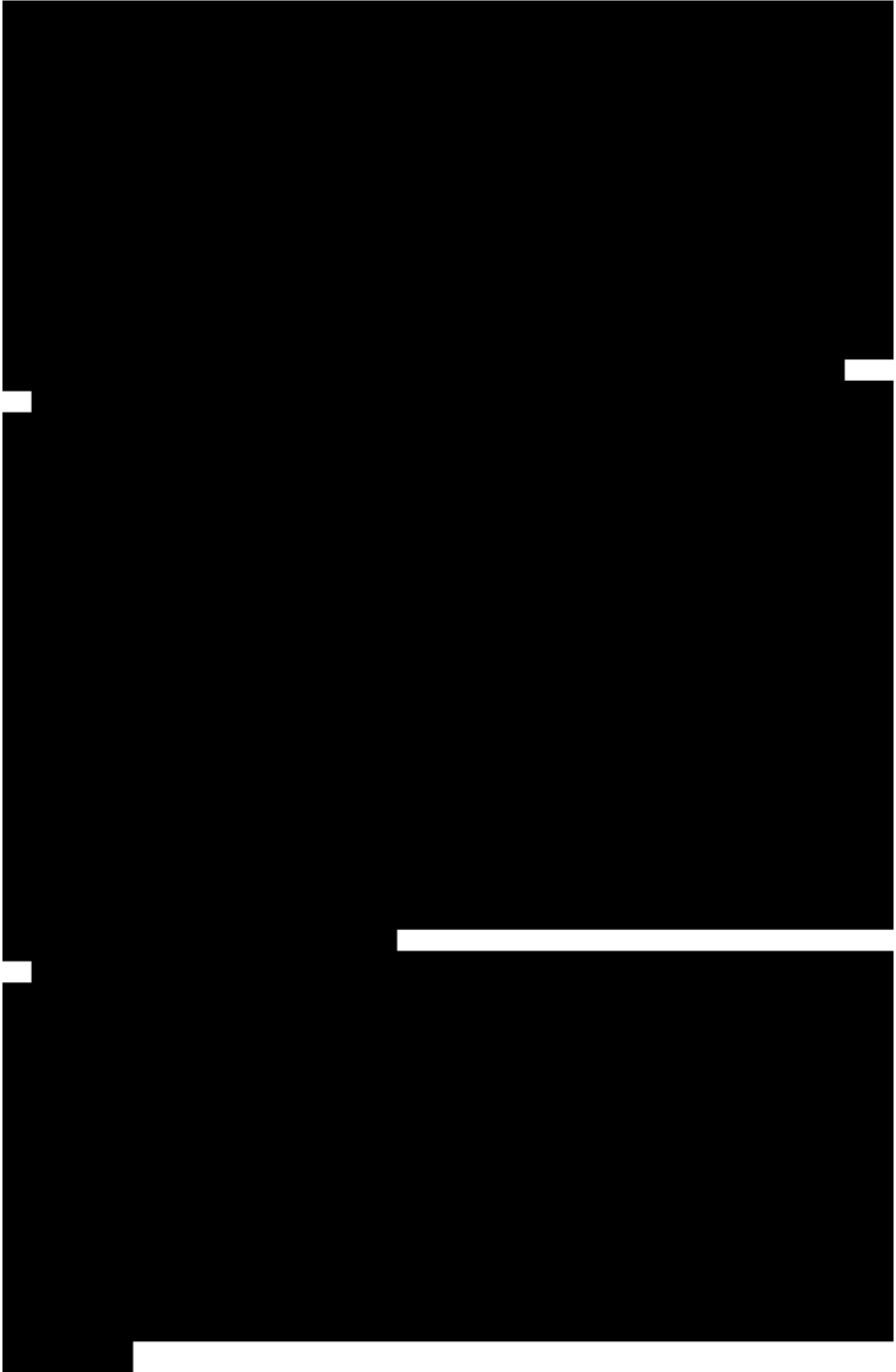
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3—Black only		Model 4—Non-Black only	
	AOR (95% CI)	p value	AOR (95% CI)	p value	AOR (95% CI)	p value	AOR (95% CI)	p value
Attitudes towards police	0.58 (0.40, 0.84)	.00***	1.07 (0.53, 2.15)	.85	0.46 (0.29, 0.73)	.00***	0.95 (0.46, 1.97)	.90
Male	4.21 (1.82, 9.70)	.00***	4.27 (1.83, 9.99)	.00***	3.18 (1.16, 8.71)	.03*	5.91 (1.00, 35.07)	.05*
Age	1.10 (0.76, 1.59)	.63	1.09 (0.75, 1.58)	.66	1.25 (0.80, 1.98)	.33	0.76 (0.34, 1.67)	.49
Perceived risk of victimization	1.35 (0.83, 2.19)	.23	1.31 (0.80, 2.13)	.28	1.13 (0.61, 2.11)	.70	1.82 (0.74, 4.47)	.19
School victimization	2.11 (0.84, 5.30)	.11	2.08 (0.81, 5.30)	.13	1.89 (0.67, 5.31)	.23	4.11 (0.35, 47.76)	.26
Outside of school victimization	3.07 (1.05, 8.98)	.04*	3.23 (1.08, 9.62)	.04*	4.40 (1.14, 17.03)	.03*	1.10 (0.12, 10.15)	.93
Black	0.93 (0.37, 2.37)	.88	0.86 (0.32, 2.30)	.77				
Attitudes towards police*Race			0.42 (0.19, 0.97)	.04*				
Pseudo R ²		.18	.20		.23		.19	
Hosmer–Lemeshow chi ²	6.78 (df=8) p = .56		3.53 (df=8) p = .90		2.79 (df=8) p = .95		7.88 (df=8) p = .45	

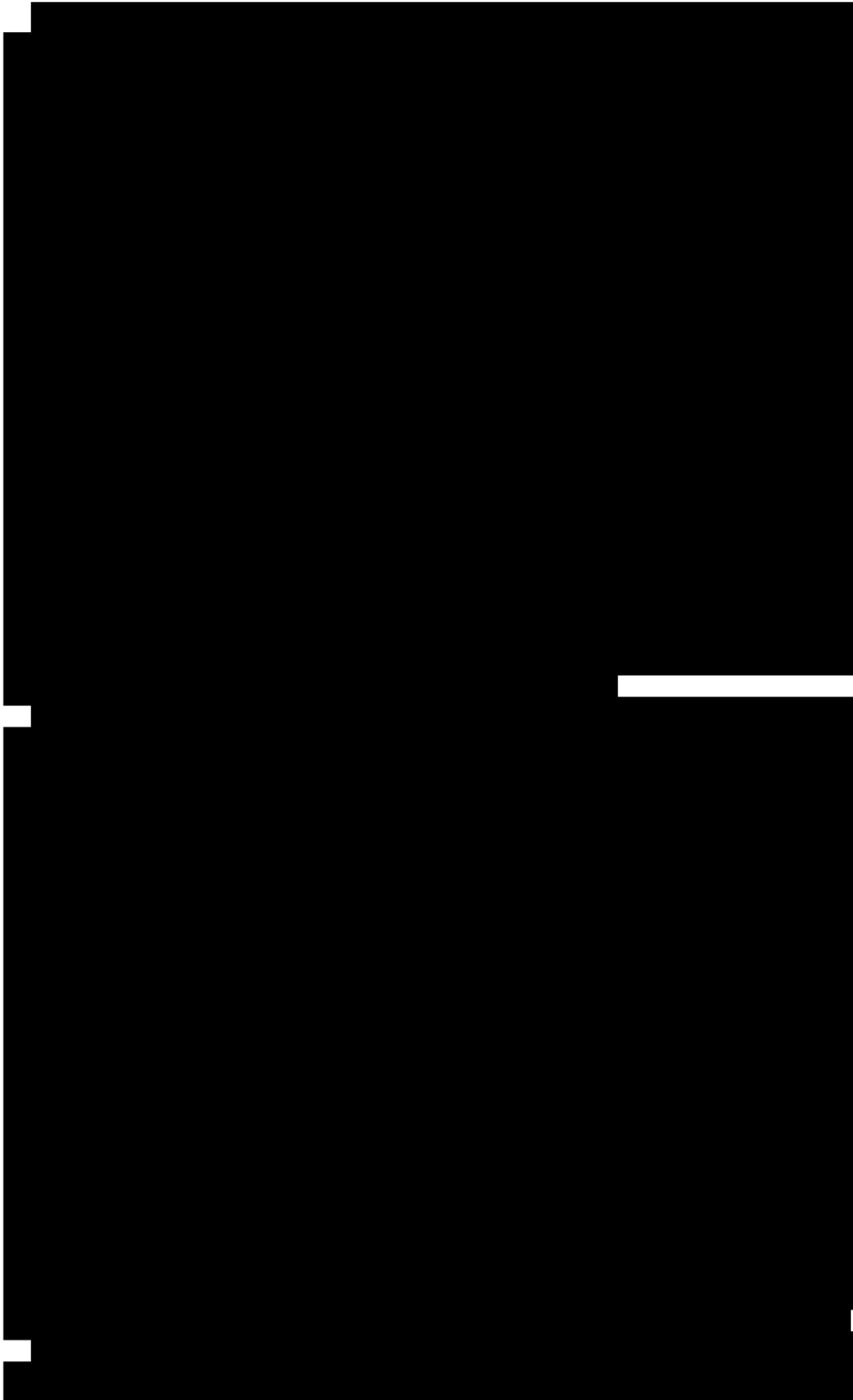
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Fig. 1 Decomposition of interaction effects of attitudes towards police by race



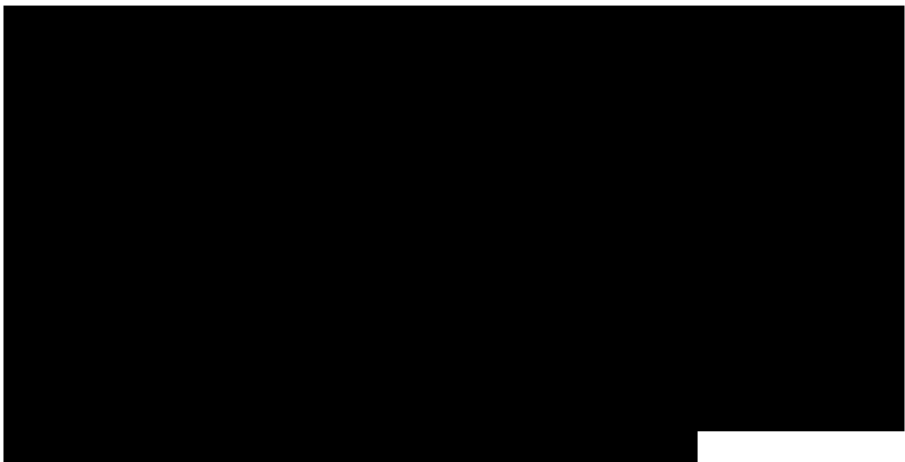
Discussion







Research Implications



Appendix A: Scale Items

Weapon Carriage (Responses: 0 = No; 1 = Yes).

Have you ever...

1. Carried a hidden weapon for protection?
2. Attacked someone with a weapon?

Attitudes Toward the Police (Responses: 1. Strongly Disagree to 5. Strongly Agree).

How much do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

1. In general, I trust the police.

2. In general, I like the police.
3. In general, I am satisfied with the police in my neighborhood.
4. The police do a good job of stopping crime.
5. If the police see someone who needs help, they will do their best to help.
6. The police do a good job of stopping people from hanging around on street corners and causing trouble.
7. The police in my neighborhood like most of the kids in the area.
8. If I were in trouble, I would feel comfortable asking a police officer for help.
9. I feel comfortable talking with police officers in my school.
10. I feel safer when police officers are in my school.

Perceived Risk of Victimization (Responses: 1 = Not at all likely to 5 = Very likely).

How likely do you think it is that the following things will happen to you?

1. Being attacked or threatened in your neighborhood.
2. Being attacked or threatened by someone with a weapon in your neighborhood.
3. Being attacked or threatened on your way to or from school.
4. Being attacked by someone with a weapon at school.
5. Being attacked or threatened at school.
6. Being bullied at school.

School Victimization (Responses: 0 = No; 1 = Yes).

Have any of the following things ever happened to you AT SCHOOL? At any time in your life...

1. Did anyone use force to take something away from you that you were carrying or wearing at school?
2. Did anyone steal something from you at school and never give it back? Things like a backpack, money, watch, clothing, bike, stereo, or anything else?
3. While at school, did anyone break or ruin any of your things on purpose?
4. Did anyone hit or attack you on purpose with an object or weapon while at school?
5. Did anyone hit or attack you on purpose without an object or weapon while at school?
6. Did someone start to attack you at school, but for some reason, it didn't happen? For example, someone helped you or you got away?
7. Did someone threaten to hurt you at school, when you thought they might really do it?
8. When a person is kidnapped, it means they were made to go somewhere, like into a car, by someone who they thought might hurt them. At any time in your life, did anyone try to kidnap you from school?
9. Have you been hit or attacked at school because of your skin color, religion, or where your family comes from? Because of a physical problem you have? Or because someone said you were gay?

Neighborhood Victimization (Responses: 0 = No; 1 = Yes).

In addition to the things you reported happening at school, have any of the following things happened to you outside of school? At any time in your life...

1. Did a gang of kids or a gang hit, jump, or attack you?

2. Did any kid, even a brother or sister, hit you? Somewhere like: at home, out playing, in a store, or anywhere else?
3. Did any kids try to hurt your private parts on purpose by hitting or kicking you there?
4. Did any kids, even a brother or sister, pick on you by chasing you or grabbing you or by making you do something you didn't want to do?
5. Did you get scared or feel really bad because kids were calling you names, saying mean things to you, or saying they didn't want you around?
6. Did a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone you went on a date with slap or hit you?
7. Did a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone you went on a date with threaten to hurt you?
8. Did a boyfriend or girlfriend or anyone you went on a date with threaten to do something embarrassing or hurtful to you if you ended your relationship?
9. Other than times you have already told me about, did any grown-up ever hit or attack you?
10. Has anyone ever used the Internet to bother or harass you or to spread mean words or pictures about you?
11. Has anyone ever used a cell phone or texting to bother or harass you or to spread mean words or pictures about you?
12. Did anyone on the Internet ever ask you sexual questions about yourself or try to get you to talk online about sex when you did not want to talk about those things?

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