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# How Can the Police Avoid Earning Our Distrust?
## Exploring the Associations of Police Distrust Among African Americans

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The American public's distrust in the police is at a historic high. Distrust impairs the ability of the police to meet their objectives. It is therefore important to better understand how the police can avoid earning distrust. Using data from the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS), we explore the associations of police distrust among African Americans. Americans as a group are overpoliced, but we focus on African Americans because of their especially high levels of interaction with the police bureaucracy and the damage police racial inequity has to their citizenship. If the police can avoid earning distrust with African Americans, police could avoid earning distrust with Americans broadly. We find that recent, frequent, discriminatory, and low-quality stops are associated with increased police distrust. This suggests that police can minimize earning distrust by avoiding unnecessary stops and, when stops cannot be avoided, by focusing on quality, nondiscriminatory interactions.

Trust is crucial for the operation of policing, and for the government at large, but trust toward government is at an all-time low in the United States (Kettl 2017; Robinson et al. 2021). American society largely exists in a condition of distrust toward government institutions like the police. Understanding why people distrust the police and how to avoid earning distrust is crucial. Avoiding police distrust is a normative good in that actions that led to distrust damage clients' quality of citizenship (Epp et al. 2014; Lerman and Weaver 2014). Avoiding distrust does not need to be sought only for normative reasons. Earning distrust should also be avoided for instrumental purposes because police legitimacy and distrust in the police are related. Distrust discourages citizens' cooperation with the police and limits the police's access to community resources (Kettl 2017; Lewicki et al. 1998; Tyler and Huo 2002). When people do not think the law is worthy of deference, they are less likely to defer to it (Tyler 2021).

Using a unique large-scale survey of African Americans, we find that police can likely avoid earning citizens' distrust and reap the normative and operational rewards by limiting coercive and punitive stops, delivering fair and high-quality encounters as judged from the perspective of individual citizens, and avoiding discrimination during interactions. Avoiding distrust is at least an equally laudable goal as gaining trust. Distinct from trust, distrust in the police has been studied for its consequences on citizens' quality of citizenship and the equitable administration of government (Epp et al. 2014). Before trust can be gained, the distrust that influences peoples' perceptions of the government's trust-building efforts must be decreased (Kettl 2017). The police carry a great deal of distrust because of the coercive nature of their activities (Soss and Weaver 2017). It is unrealistic to believe that every single government interaction offers opportunities to build trust. Coercive interactions are prone to creating distrust and, for some interactions, earning distrust can at best be minimized. While some bureaucracies, like the post office, exist to provide noncoercive services, others operate in a largely coercive, punitive, or investigatory manner (Leo 1992). Police departments offer a variety of services, but their primary role is to enforce state policy (Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce 2010; Jackson et al. 2013; Leo 1992). We expect that for policing, avoiding citizens' distrust is equally as important as gaining citizens' trust because of existing high levels of distrust in policing and the nature of much police work.

Using a novel survey dataset, we explore distrust in the police among African Americans to understand how government can avoid earning citizens' distrust. We use the phrase "earn" deliberately, to emphasize that citizens' trust and distrust in government are often in part a direct consequence of government's actions (Kettl 2017). While police organizations cannot control everything that influences distrust in their departments, there are key factors within their control.

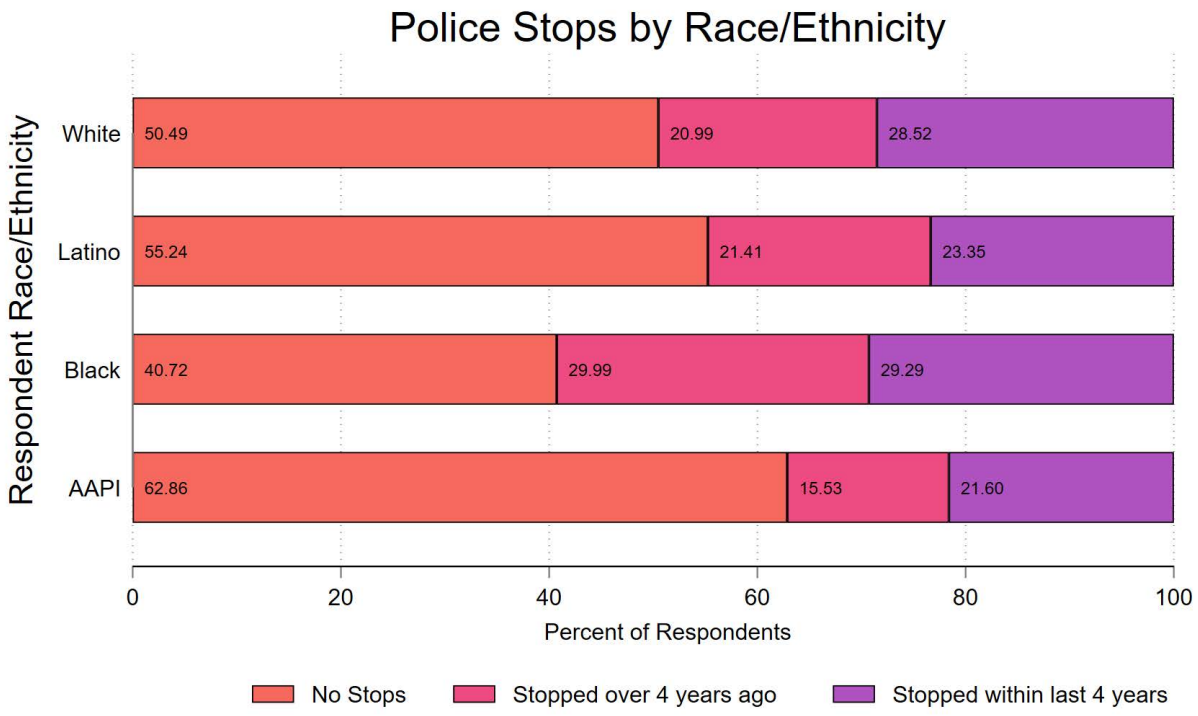
As shown in Figure 1, police stops—defined as being stopped and questioned by the police——are high across all racial and ethnic groups in the United States. Despite the high levels of police stops among Americans generally, African Americans are disproportionately subject to police stops. This is not a new finding (Lerman and Weaver 2014). Approximately 59.28% of African Americans report having been stopped in their lifetime. This is almost 10 percentage points more than whites. We believe that our findings are relevant for groups besides African Americans and, although we give consideration to complex intersectional experiences (Blessett 2020; McCandless and Elias 2021; Soss and Weaver 2017), we focus on African Americans because they report a disproportionate frequency of police stops.

Examining African Americans' distrust in police will help provide good lessons for government about distrust generally because of the high levels of distrust that African Americans express toward police (Epp et al. 2014; Gibson and Nelson 2018). Doing so will also contribute to an ongoing scholarly discussion about the role of racial inequity in criminal justice administration (Blessett and Box 2016; Gaynor and Blessett 2020). Although organizations like the police cannot reasonably expect each interaction to build trust, there are nevertheless ways to avoid creating distrust with citizens. While contact with coercive institutions are predisposed toward earning distrust, the effects of police stops can be lessened by avoiding discrimination and through higher-quality encounters.

## Trust in Governmental Institutions

Trust in governmental institutions is crucial for their effectiveness (Vigoda-Gadot 2017). Trust in governmental institutions is an individual's belief that those holding power will work in an acceptable way (O'Brien et al. 2020). Legal justice scholarship defines trust in the police as an individual's belief that departments and of-

**Figure 1. Police Stops by Race/Ethnicity**




Note: Stop defined as being stopped and questioned by police while in a car or while on foot.
Weighted based on the 1YR 2019 American Community Survey

ficers within them will act as appropriate embodiments of the legal enforcement power of government (Reisig and Lloyd 2008; Tyler 2004; Tyler and Fagan 2008). Trust is a multifactored concept that has included aspects of satisfaction, process, corruption, credibility, and performance, among others (James and Van Ryzin 2017; Van Ryzin 2004; Van Ryzin 2007; Villoria et al. 2013). Public administration has identified a link between trust and transparency (Cooper et al. 2008, although see Kettl 2017 for critiques), especially as it relates to the use of information communication technology (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; Jenkins, Landgrave, and Martinez 2020; Landgrave 2022; Porumbescu 2017).

Trust is of both a general and specific character. General trust is difficult to change through interactions and is largely based on social expectations and experiences. Those privileged in society tend to trust that society's institutions generally based on their prior interactions with it, which tend to build trust. Those who are not privileged, for example through age, income, sex, race, or education, tend to trust those institutions less because of their experiences (Blessett 2020; Kettl 2017). Interactions with specific government agencies can influence general trust as specific experiences accrue and inform individuals about general government. Police are the primary point of contact within government for many Americans (Soss and Weaver 2017). Negative criminal justice encounters have implications for how people see general government (Brayne 2014).

Specific trust in government is informed by experiences and interactions with specific government organizations. Many people may not have direct, frequent, or meaningful interactions with many parts of the U.S.'s national government, and yet would be able to articulate a level of trust in many of them based on their general trust in the institution of the U.S. government. At the same time, interactions with national government agencies could form a specific impression separate from the overall institution of government. Many people interact with their local government and its departments on a more frequent basis than the federal government and form specific trust in local departments that is detached from their general trust in local government (Kettl 2017). Research into trust in a specific government organization must account for the portion of trust in that organization that comes from being within a larger organization, lest the effects of more general trust become confused with the effects on specific trust from specific agency interactions (Christensen and Lægreid 2005; Kampen et al. 2006).

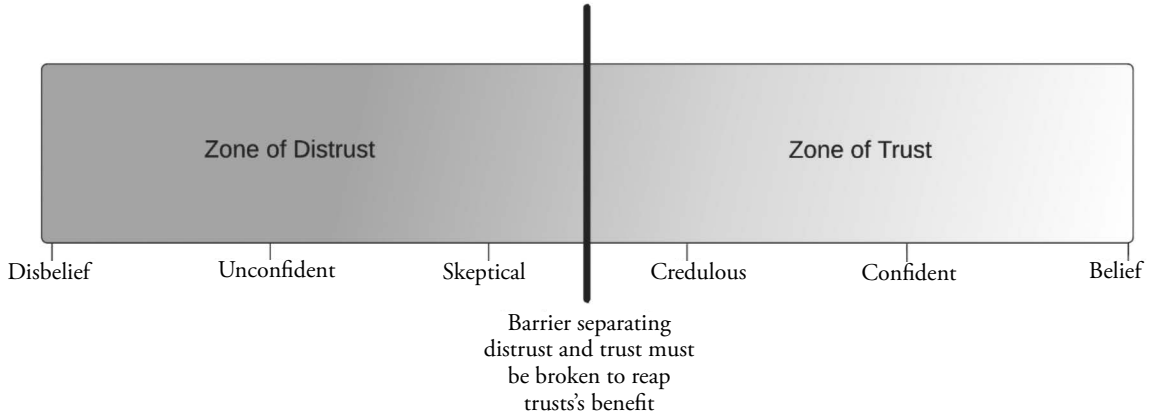
## Distrust in Governmental Institutions

Scholarship in public administration and on public organizations, when it has focused on trust, has mostly focused on trust without considering trust's absence (Lewicki et al. 1998). While trust is important for a government's effective operations, trust must be earned and can also be lost entirely (Thompson and Pickett 2021). Before trust can be earned, distrust must be avoided or set aside. In liberal government (Shklar 1984), there is an inherent distrust in government among the governed which must be overcome to gain access to trust's benefits (Kettl 2017). Government officials are in positions to exercise power unfairly, so a degree of distrust in government seems rational. Crucially, prior to being able to earn trust, distrust must be avoided (Skogan 2006). Distrust is not merely trust's absence—distrust and trust exist distinctly (Lee and Dodge 2019). Epp and colleagues (2014) examine distrust by examining how people distrust that police will be fair or equitable. Krouwel and Abts (2007) describe trust as a spectrum of distrust to trust within which distrust and trust exist in a gradated continuum. We illustrate our interpretation of this continuum in Figure 2.

Kettl (2017) describes trust and distrust as both cause and effect; that is, prior contacts with government inform current assessments of distrust in government; current distrust in government informs the character and perceptions of current contacts with government; and current contacts with government inform distrust for future assessments and contacts. At a sufficiently high level of distrust, no words or actions from the government will be trusted (Koesten and Rowland 2004). Distrust makes trust building extremely challenging. Even innocuous, innocent, or problem-solving communications might be interpreted cynically by audiences if they enter the communicative situation at high levels of distrust. This creates a barrier between distrust and trust, where distrust must be overcome before trust can be gained.

Prior contacts, including police stops, with government are crucially important for structuring citizens' trust and distrust in specific governments in the present because those interactions provide the context that

**Figure 2. Zones of Trust and Distrust in Government**




is necessary to create specific trust and distrust (Kettl 2017). Similarly, in a paper on symbolic representation in policing, Headley and colleagues (2021) build a framework within which past experiences with police lead to future expectations for police stops. They argue that police stops change individuals' perceptions of the police and add to their lived experiences, and those updated experiences change expectations for future police stops. Any past interactions, including police stops, may inform distrust in government, as individuals use past interactions to inform distrust in present interactions and present interactions to inform future interactions. The distrust effects of police stops could include the recency of stops, the frequency of stops, and early socialization into police stops.

Police stops are most often of an investigatory nature in the United States, and while this need not always be the case (Tyler et al. 2015), recent police stops are likely important for creating current distrust in the police given the investigatory context of most citizens' police interactions (Alberton and Gorey 2008; Bradford et al. 2009; Trinkner et al. 2018). Criminal justice research identifies that the outcome of police stops—like citations or arrests—can influence distrust in the police (Cochran and Warren 2012; Reisig et al. 2018; Solomon 2019). However, regardless of the reason for a stop or its outcome, a mere stop could influence distrust. The length of time from a stop, be it more recent or more distant, might influence the distrust that stop creates; and, given the human reliance on recent events in decision-making, we expect a recency bias (Tversky and Kahneman 1974) in which more recent stops create distrust more strongly than more temporally distant stops.

H1A: Any police stop is positively associated with distrust.

H1B: Recent police stops are positively associated with distrust.

The distrust effects of stops are likely to increase as the frequency of involuntary police stops increases over one's lifetime (Brunson 2007; Gau and Brunson 2010; Hurst et al. 2000). More recent stops are more likely to influence distrust in the police than less recent stops, and frequent stops are also likely to increase distrust more than less frequent stops. Frequent police stops lead to personal life decline, including declines in mental health (Epp et al. 2014; Geller et al. 2014), which could lead to more distrustful assessments of departments during future stops.

H2: More frequent police stops are positively associated with police distrust.

While frequent or recent stops may exert a strong influence on present distrust, police stops early in life could also provide particularly formative experiences that have unique effects on present distrust (Schuck et al. 2008). African Americans frequently report police stops early in life (Brunson and Weitzer 2009; Stewart et al. 2009), and that frequency may indicate a unique effect from stops at a young age (Slocum and Wiley 2018). "The emotional force of minority youths' first experiences of the police leaves a visceral and lasting memory of the state exerting power over their bodies" (Soss and Weaver 2017, p. 581).

H3: Police stops early in life are positively associated with police distrust.

The quality of a government interaction (Van Ryzin 2011) is key for citizens' processes when forming attitudes toward police. Generally, citizens can determine the overall quality of their government interactions (Kettl 2017). Satisfaction with the government services that one receives are crucial for trust in the government delivering them (Christensen and Lægreid 2005). When citizens experience a low-quality police stop, they are more likely to think the police are unfair (Renauer and Covelli 2011). Numerous factors influence citizens' judgment in the quality of their stop, including officer demeanor, proceduralism, and helpfulness (Areh et al. 2007). Trust in government also influences perceptions of the quality of the government services and must be accounted for to reliably estimate stop quality's effects on specific trust (Van der Walle and Bouckaert 2007).

Avoiding discrimination is important for citizens' understandings of the overall quality of their experiences with police (Tyler 2005; Van Ryzin et al. 2004). Expectations for discrimination's effects on distrust are like stop's effects, in that experiences with past discrimination likely increase present distrust and increase expectations for future discrimination (Tyler and Wakslak 2006). Research conducted in Chicago found that unfair interactions with police contributed to distrust in community policing among all racial groups (Evangelist 2022). That research also showed that, for African Americans, discriminatory police interactions increased distrust in the police specifically but did not have effects on generalized trust (Evangelist 2022). Rothstein and Terrell (2008) argue that impartiality in governance is crucial for quality and satisfactory governance, in that without expectations of impartiality citizens will not be able to overcome the distrust that would be necessary for building trust. This leads to an expectation that discrimination in stops, as well as the overall quality of stops, will lead to more distrust in policing.

H4A: Poor quality stops are positively associated with police distrust.

H4B: Discriminatory stops are positively associated with police distrust.

## Data and Research Methods

To better understand the associations of police distrust, we focus on African Americans. We chose this group because they are disproportionally stopped by the police (see Figure 1) and have high levels of distrust in the police (Epp et al. 2014; Wheelock et al. 2019). Additionally, we focus on African Americans to contribute to a crucial discourse in public administration research on racial inequity in policing. Through our examination, we will demonstrate the association between police encounters, those encounters' characteristics, and distrust in the police. We present a detailed associational analysis examining the relationship between distrust in the police on one hand, and recency of police contact, frequency of police contact, age of first police contact, discrimination in the recent police stop, and quality of criminal justice system contacts.

As our primary data source, we use the 2020 Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey (CMPS) (Barreto et al. 2018). The primary 2020 CMPS sample surveyed 14,988 U.S. respondents from April 2021 to August 2021 and was designed to capture political attitudes following the 2020 presidential election. Unlike similar surveys like the American National Election Survey (ANES) and Cooperative Election Study (CES), the CMPS is primarily designed to survey otherwise hard to survey populations like Latinx (n = 4,319), Black and African American (n = 4,396) and Asian American Pacific Islanders (n = 3,239).[1] In this article we use the Black and African American subsample, although Figure 1 shows police stops for four races. Due to its sample size, the CMPS provides a particularly rich source of data well-suited to exploring distrust in police among African Americans.

Table 1 describes how survey responses were coded for the quantitative analysis and shows the main variables of interest for our analysis excluding socio-demographic controls. The first column shows the text of the question asked of respondents. In several cases, the questions used were part of a series designed to ask numerous questions using the same response scale. If our variables were part of a series, we indent the portion of the series we relied on so that it is below the portion of the question that applied to the whole series. The

1. The 2020 CMPS also includes a secondary sample of additional subsamples of otherwise hard to survey groups, like Native Americas and the LGBT+ population. We do not use this secondary sample here.

**Table 1. Variable Wording and Scaling**

| Survey Question Text | Responses (numerical scaling) | Variable for Analysis |
|---|---|---|
| How much do you agree with the following statement?<br>I do not trust the police to protect my community. | Strongly disagree (1); Disagree (2); Somewhat disagree (3); Neither agree nor disagree (4); Somewhat agree (5); Agree (6); Strongly agree (7) | Distrust in police |
| Please indicate whether any of the following have happened to you:<br>Been stopped and questioned by the police while in a car; Been stopped and questioned by the police while you were on foot. | Yes, this has happened within the last 4 years (0/1); Yes, this has happened, but over 4 years ago (0/1) | Recent stop; Distant stop |
| Please indicate whether any of the following have happened to you:<br>Been charged a fine or fee for a noncriminal infraction; Been arrested, booked, or charged with a crime; Been convicted of a crime, even if you weren't guilty; Been charged a fine for a criminal conviction; Been on probation or parole; Spent time in jail or prison, including juvenile detention. | Yes, this has happened within the last 4 years; Yes, this has happened, but over 4 years ago (1); No, this has never happened to me (0) | Punished |
| (If yes to recent or distant contact with criminal justice system): Would you say the experiences dealing with law enforcement were mostly positive, neutral, or mostly negative? | Mostly positive (1); Mostly neutral (2); mostly negative (3) | Quality of stop |
| How old were you when you first had involuntary contact with law enforcement, meaning they approached you? | I was younger than 14 years old (1); Between 14 and 17 years old (2); Between 18 and 24 years old (3); Between 25 and 35 years old (4); Older than 35 years old (5); I have never had contact with law enforcement (6) | Age at first stop |
| (If yes to recent or distant contact with criminal justice system): How many times have you had an involuntary encounter with law enforcement in your life? | 1 to 2 times (1);<br>3 to 4 times (2);<br>5 to 7 times (3);<br>More than 7 times (4) | Lifetime stops |
| In the past 4 years, have you experienced discrimination or exclusion because you are Black/African American in any of the following settings?<br>In dealings with the police | Yes, in dealings with the police (0/1) | Discrimination |
| How much of the time can you trust your local government to do what is right? | Always (1); Most of the time (2); Only some of the time (3); Never (4) | General distrust |

second column shows responses to those questions and our coding of those responses for quantitative analysis. The third column shows the correspondence between variables and concepts those variables represent.

Two additional considerations are of note. First, the number of observations for the discrimination and quality survey items are lower than other survey items because they are only asked of people who have had a criminal justice contact. During statistical modeling, those two variables will be added iteratively to understand how adding them changes relationships between stops, distrust, and encounter characteristics. Including these variables reduces our sample size. We exclude nonrespondent participants from models that contain questions to which they did not respond. Second, we include a more detailed description of some control

**Table 2. Descriptive Statistics**

| Name | Mean | Median | Std. Dev. | Observations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Distrust in Police | 4.10 | 4 ("Somewhat agree") | 1.67 | 4,396 |
| Recent Stop | 30% | 0 ("No") | 0.46 | 4,396 |
| Distant Stop | 42% | 0 ("No") | 0.49 | 4,396 |
| Age at First Stop | 3.64 | 3 ("Between 25 and 35 years old") | 1.82 | 4,396 |
| General Distrust | 2.73 | 3 ("Only some of the time) | 0.82 | 4,396 |
| Discrimination | 23% | 0 ("No") | 0.42 | 4,396 |
| Punished | 0.41 | 0 ("No, this has never happened to me") | 0.49 | 4,396 |
| Lifetime Stops | 1.90 | 2 ("3 to 4 contacts") | 1.04 | 3,444 |
| Stop Quality | 1.98 | 2 ("Neutral") | 0.71 | 3,444 |

variables, including general trust in government in Table 1. Like discrimination and quality variables, we will iteratively control for general distrust in government to control for the influence that it has on specific distrust in the police and for the outcome of past police encounters to control for outcomes' influence.

Unless stated otherwise, we rely on ordinary least squares regression for statistical analysis. We include common socio-demographic variables with coding details listed in model notes. Table 2 shows descriptive statistics for our sample, African Americans in the 2020 CMPS. The main dependent variable, distrust in the police ("How much do you agree with the following statement: I do not trust the police to protect my community"), has a median of 4 representing somewhat agreeing, with a mean of 4.10. Overall, the sample seemed to express some distrust in the police. Exactly 42% of the sample indicated having been stopped by the police more than four years ago and 30% reported having been stopped within four years. About 11% of respondents reported having both recent and distant stops. The median age of the first stop was between 25 and 35 years, although the survey was limited to noninstitutionalized populations and cannot represent people who were incarcerated at the time of survey administration or other similarly situated institutionalized persons. The median respondent also reported trusting their local government only some of the time, represented by 3 on that scale. About 23% of respondents reported having experienced discrimination with police in the last four years because they were African American, with the median respondent describing their overall experiences with law enforcement as neutral.

## Results

Figure 3 shows the relationship between racial discrimination and the quality of police encounters in our sample. Based on this figure, there appears to be a relationship between discrimination and perceptions of stop quality. Among those who reported mostly negative police encounters, 46.64% reported a discriminatory encounter compared to 22.69% among those who reported a neutral encounter and 18.33% among those who reported a positive encounter.

Figure 4 shows a descriptive relationship between the quality of police stops and distrust in the police. For graphical clarity, levels of distrust were reduced from a scale of 1–7 to a 3–point scale of "disagree" (Strongly disagree, Disagree, Somewhat disagree), "Neither agree nor disagree" (Neither agree nor disagree), and "Agree" (Somewhat agree, Agree, Strongly agree). Responses show that 50.43% of respondents who reported a mostly negative police encounter (which were more likely to be reported as discriminatory than as positive) agreed that they distrusted the police to protect their community. On the other hand, 34.72% of those who reported mostly positive encounters reported that they agreed they did not trust the police to protect their community. There seems to be a relationship between the quality of police stops and distrust in the police. Even respondents with positive quality stops might distrust police.

Our first set of statistical models in Table 3 examines distrust in the police based on the recency of being stopped by the police. These models consider how recent (four years ago or more recent) and distant (more than four years ago at the time of asking) stops by the

**Figure 3. Perceived Racial Discrimination by Quality of Average Police Stop**

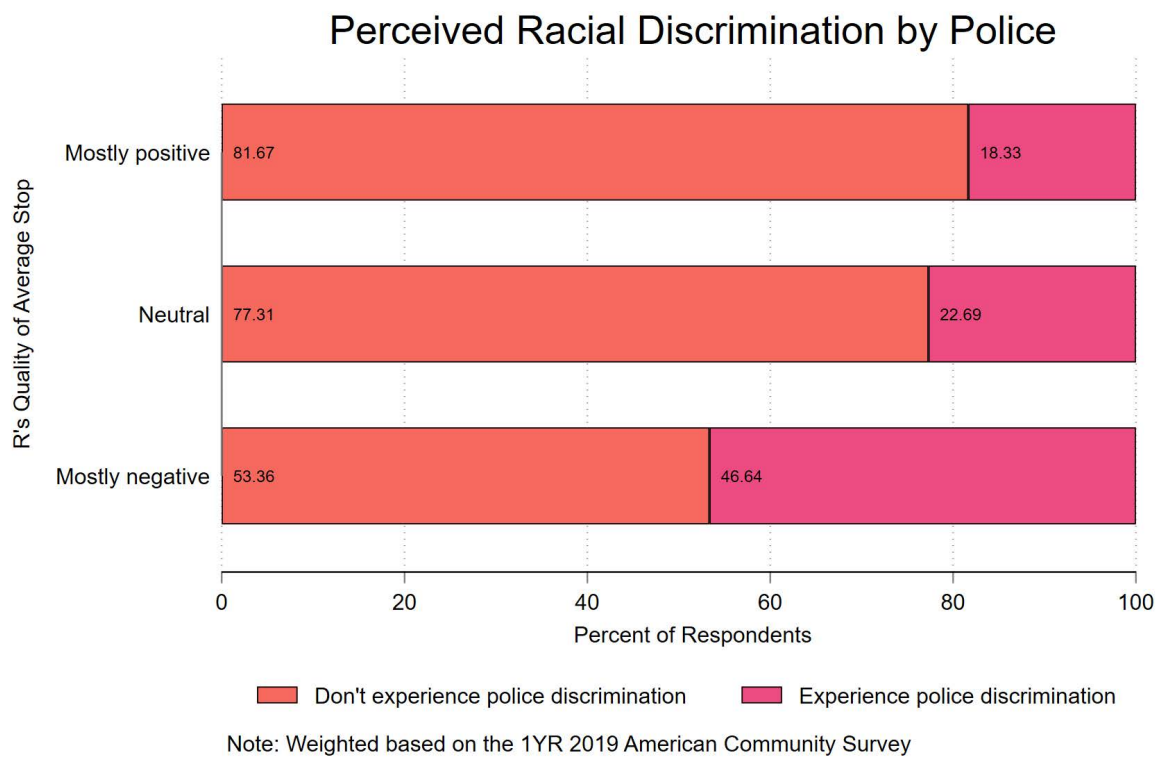



**Figure 4. Police Distrust by Quality of Average Police Stop**

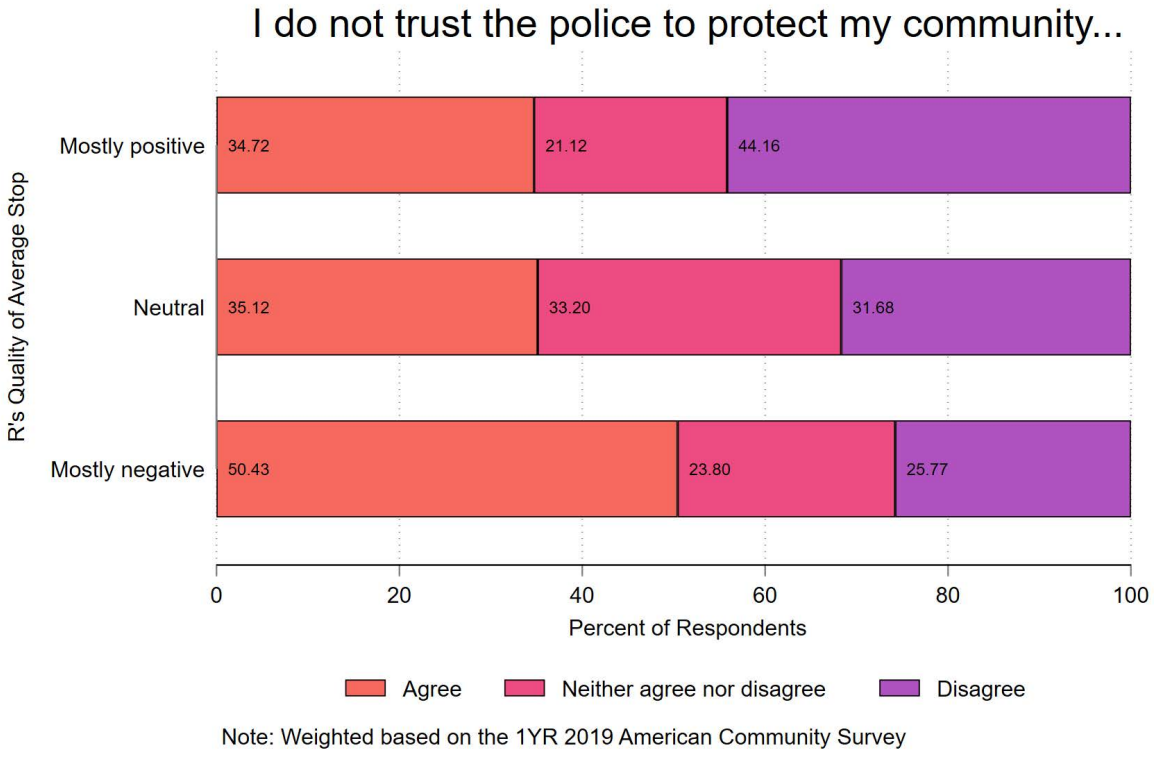


**Table 3. Stop Recency and Distrust in the Police**

| | Model 1 | Model 2 | Model 3 | Model 4 | Model 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Recent Stop | 0.554*** | 0.573*** | 0.504*** | 0.441*** | 0.346*** |
| | (0.0734) | (0.0755) | (0.0877) | (0.0908) | (0.0914) |
| Distant Stop | 0.110+ | 0.127* | 0.0834 | 0.0280 | 0.00632 |
| | (0.0551) | (0.0560) | (0.0625) | (0.0606) | (0.0594) |
| Male | 0.0532 | 0.0772 | 0.0181 | –0.0147 | –0.0435 |
| | (0.0622) | (0.0614) | (0.0757) | (0.0763) | (0.0755) |
| Age | –0.0209*** | –0.0210*** | –0.0219*** | –0.0212*** | –0.0199*** |
| | (0.00189) | (0.00187) | (0.00220) | (0.00222) | (0.00222) |
| Income | –0.0242* | –0.0226* | –0.0197+ | –0.0177 | –0.0177 |
| | (0.00940) | (0.00955) | (0.0112) | (0.0111) | (0.0110) |
| Democrat | 0.204** | 0.246*** | 0.174* | 0.177* | 0.168* |
| | (0.0631) | (0.0655) | (0.0694) | (0.0685) | (0.0685) |
| Education | –0.0581** | –0.0590** | –0.0560** | –0.0491* | –0.0450* |
| | (0.0205) | (0.0204) | (0.0190) | (0.0191) | (0.0175) |
| Ruralness | –0.0653** | –0.0690** | –0.0832** | –0.0837** | –0.0865** |
| | (0.0219) | (0.0218) | (0.0264) | (0.0268) | (0.0273) |
| Linked Fate | 0.0401+ | 0.0294 | –0.0161 | –0.00535 | –0.0133 |
| | (0.0217) | (0.0218) | (0.0328) | (0.0326) | (0.0322) |
| General Distrust | | 0.152*** | 0.0897** | 0.110** | 0.103** |
| | | (0.0304) | (0.0309) | (0.0332) | (0.0329) |
| Stop Quality (reference: "Mostly Positive") | | | | | |
| Neutral | | | 0.201** | 0.197** | 0.182* |
| | | | (0.0692) | (0.0708) | (0.0681) |
| Mostly Negative | | | 0.640*** | 0.600*** | 0.510*** |
| | | | (0.0852) | (0.0883) | (0.0834) |
| Punished | | | | 0.266** | 0.236** |
| | | | | (0.0771) | (0.0796) |
| Discrimination | | | | | 0.443*** |
| | | | | | (0.0819) |
| Constant | 5.001*** | 4.591*** | 4.819*** | 4.599*** | 4.571*** |
| R –sq | 0.099 | 0.104 | 0.128 | 0.133 | 0.144 |
| N | 4035 | 4035 | 3183 | 3183 | 3183 |

Note: + = p < 0.10; * = p < 0.05; ** = p < 0.01; *** p < 0.001. Control variables coded as: Male (male = 1, non-male = 0); age (in years); income (less than $20,000, $9,999 increments from $20,000 to $99,999, $49,999 increments from $100,000 to more than $200,000); education (no high school = 1, less than high school = 2, high school = 3, some college = 4, associate's degree = 5, Bachelor's degree = 6, post-graduate degree = 7); linked fate (What happens to other African Americans has: nothing to do with my life = 1, only a little to do with = 2, something to do with = 3, a lot to do with = 4, a huge amount to do with my life = 5); ruralness (Large urban area = 1, Large suburb near large city = 2, Small suburb near small town or city = 3, Small town or small city = 4, Rural area = 5). Standard errors are in parentheses.

**Table 4. Age at First Police Stop and Distrust in the Police**

| | Model 6 | Model 7 | Model 8 | Model 9 | Model 10 | Model 11 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| First Stop Age | –0.0659* | –0.0653+ | –0.0537 | –0.00620 | 0.000974 | 0.0104 |
| | (0.0325) | (0.0329) | (0.0334) | (0.0385) | (0.0381) | (0.0385) |
| Male | 0.0584 | 0.0860 | 0.0406 | 0.0119 | –0.0216 | –0.0524 |
| | (0.0633) | (0.0642) | (0.0580) | (0.0658) | (0.0666) | (0.0675) |
| Age | –0.0246*** | –0.0247*** | –0.0216*** | –0.0234*** | –0.0229*** | –0.0218*** |
| | (0.00206) | (0.00204) | (0.00208) | (0.00218) | (0.00216) | (0.00221) |
| Income | –0.0236+ | –0.0219+ | –0.0229+ | –0.0160 | –0.0136 | –0.0126 |
| | (0.0126) | (0.0125) | (0.0125) | (0.0124) | (0.0122) | (0.0122) |
| Democrat | 0.142* | 0.186** | 0.184** | 0.149+ | 0.150+ | 0.142+ |
| | (0.0666) | (0.0686) | (0.0673) | (0.0761) | (0.0754) | (0.0752) |
| Education | –0.0538* | –0.0550* | –0.0570* | –0.0561* | –0.0498+ | –0.0457+ |
| | (0.0264) | (0.0267) | (0.0259) | (0.0252) | (0.0253) | (0.0236) |
| Ruralness | –0.0800** | –0.0826** | –0.0746** | –0.0702* | –0.0722* | –0.0763* |
| | (0.0253) | (0.0252) | (0.0242) | (0.0299) | (0.0308) | (0.0310) |
| Linked Fate | 0.0646* | 0.0519+ | 0.0436 | 0.0142 | 0.0265 | 0.0181 |
| | (0.0303) | (0.0300) | (0.0296) | (0.0339) | (0.0338) | (0.0347) |
| General Distrust | | 0.169*** | 0.177*** | 0.109* | 0.133** | 0.124* |
| | | (0.0369) | (0.0378) | (0.0435) | (0.0465) | (0.0464) |
| Recent Stop | | | 0.458*** | 0.413*** | 0.380*** | 0.293** |
| | | | (0.0882) | (0.0882) | (0.0897) | (0.0912) |
| Stop Quality (reference: "Mostly Positive") | | | | | | |
| Neutral | | | | 0.289*** | 0.283*** | 0.266*** |
| | | | | (0.0724) | (0.0751) | (0.0718) |
| Mostly Negative | | | | 0.780*** | 0.737*** | 0.647*** |
| | | | | (0.0921) | (0.0960) | (0.0915) |
| Punished | | | | | 0.267** | 0.229** |
| | | | | | (0.0784) | (0.0816) |
| Discrimination | | | | | | 0.462*** |
| | | | | | | (0.0859) |
| Constant | 5.554*** | 5.115*** | 4.803*** | 4.683*** | 4.402*** | 4.340*** |
| R-sq | 0.086 | 0.091 | 0.107 | 0.132 | 0.137 | 0.150 |
| N | 3032 | 3032 | 3032 | 2733 | 2733 | 2733 |

Note: + = p <0.10; * = p <0.05; ** = p <0.01; *** p <0.001. Control variables coded as: Male (male = 1, non-male = 0); age (in years); income (categorical: less than $20,000, $9,999 increments from $20,000 to $99,999, $49,999 increments from $100,000 to more than $200,000); education (no high school = 1, less than high school =2, high school = 3, some college = 4, associate's degree = 5, Bachelor's degree = 6, post-graduate degree = 7); linked fate (What happens to other African Americans has: nothing to do with my life = 1, only a little to do with = 2, something to do with = 3, a lot to do with = 4, a huge amount to do with my life = 5); ruralness (Large urban area = 1, Large suburb near large city = 2, Small suburb near small town or city = 3, Small town or small city = 4, Rural area = 5). Standard errors are in parentheses. Table 4 includes only those who have had at least one contact with the police.

police contribute to distrust in the police while controlling for socio-demographic and other factors. Socio-demographic coding is described in model notes along with symbols for statistical significance and other information. Models 2, 3, 4, and 5 iteratively control for the effect of general distrust in local government on distrust in a specific department, the overall quality of one's police stops, having received a criminal justice punishment in the past, and experiencing discrimination during a police stop, respectively.

Model 1 in Table 3 shows that both more recent and more distant stops contribute to distrust. Recent stops appear to have a larger effect on distrust (0.561) than more distant stops (0.110) in model 1. Recent and distant stops relatively maintain their magnitudes and statistical significance while controlling for general distrust in local government in model 2. In models that also control for the quality of police stops, discrimination in police stops, and having been punished by police in the past (3, 4, and 5), the distant stop coefficient loses statistical significance. This could indicate that although distant stops can influence present distrust, the quality of stops, the outcome of a stop, and the presence of a more recent stop have greater influence. The recent stop coefficients seem to lose magnitude in models 3 through 5 but maintain significance in a way that suggests that recent stops by the police increase distrust in the police even when considering other influential factors during that stop.

In Table 4, our models examine the effect of age of the first police stop on distrust in the police among those who have had police stops in their lives. We exclude those who report having had no police stops, because we wish to consider only the effect of the age at the first stop and exclude the effect of a stop occurring or not occurring. Appendix Table A includes respondents without police contacts. Table 4 models iteratively control for a variety of factors important for distrust in the police, similar to controls in Table 3. Model 8 also introduces an additional control variable, recent police stop, given the indication from Table 3 that recent stops influence present distrust in the police. Age of first stop has a statistically significant effect in models 6 and 7, indicating that as age of first stop increases, present distrust in police decreases. When controlling for recent police stops, police stop outcomes, quality of police stops, and experiencing discrimination during police stops—in models 8 through 11—the effect of age at first stop loses statistical significance. This suggests that the characteristics of police encounters have more influence than when the first stop occurred; however, consistent with models in Table 3, recent stops by the police do continue to increase distrust in the police on average in Table 4. Table A shows that age at first contact is positively associated with distrust.

Table 5 looks at the relationship between a lifelong number of stops with the police and distrust in the police. Like in other tables, these models iteratively control for socio-demographic factors as well as other factors important for distrust in the police. Lifelong number of stops influence police distrust, although that influence seems to wane when accounting for the overall quality of police stops, the outcome of police stops, and having had recent police stops. This suggests that while total number of stops may create a small police distrust effect on average, the effect is likely not large and other factors, like recent stops, stop quality, stop outcomes, and discrimination during encounters, are more influential.

Table 6 considers recent and distant stops, age at first police stop, lifelong number of police stops, stop quality, experiences with police discrimination, and socio-demographic controls for distrust in the police. In this more general model, recent stops, general distrust, age at first stop, police discrimination, having experienced punitive outcomes, and lower-quality encounters, all contribute to distrust in the police. The presence and absence of recent stops, personal history with the police in terms of age at first stop, and the characteristics of encounters with the police, appear to influence overall present distrust in the police. Encountering the police seems to increase distrust in the police with especially strong effects from recent encounters. Earlier, low-quality and discriminatory encounters seem to impart additional distrust.

## Discussion

Our analyses show that encounters with the police are sufficient to increase distrust in the police among African Americans. Even when statistically controlling for a variety of other factors that influence distrust in the police, recent stops' effects on distrust remain. Much police work is inherently punitive, coercive, or investigatory. Given the nature of policing, it is unrealistic to assume that all police stops can have the potential to decrease distrust in the police. The mere act of having been stopped

**Table 5. Lifelong Stops by Police**

| | Model 12 | Model 13 | Model 14 | Model 15 | Model 16 | Model 17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Lifelong Stop # | 0.173*** | 0.165*** | 0.122** | 0.0511 | 0.0214 | 0.000113 |
| | (0.0349) | (0.0354) | (0.0356) | (0.0394) | (0.0404) | (0.0381) |
| Male | 0.0220 | 0.0495 | 0.0230 | –0.00261 | –0.0282 | –0.0582 |
| | (0.0743) | (0.0746) | (0.0710) | (0.0665) | (0.0663) | (0.0677) |
| Age | –0.0262*** | –0.0264*** | –0.0232*** | –0.0236*** | –0.0229*** | –0.0216*** |
| | (0.00219) | (0.00217) | (0.00222) | (0.00210) | (0.00212) | (0.00211) |
| Income | –0.0200 | –0.0182 | –0.0188 | –0.0157 | –0.0136 | –0.0127 |
| | (0.0125) | (0.0126) | (0.0126) | (0.0124) | (0.0122) | (0.0122) |
| Democrat | 0.147+ | 0.184* | 0.178* | 0.152+ | 0.151+ | 0.143+ |
| | (0.0765) | (0.0798) | (0.0788) | (0.0763) | (0.0754) | (0.0753) |
| Education | –0.0563* | –0.0579* | –0.0617* | –0.0555* | –0.0497+ | –0.0454+ |
| | (0.0272) | (0.0276) | (0.0272) | (0.0255) | (0.0253) | (0.0234) |
| Ruralness | –0.0772* | –0.0799* | –0.0726* | –0.0708* | –0.0724* | –0.0762* |
| | (0.0309) | (0.0305) | (0.0295) | (0.0300) | (0.0308) | (0.0309) |
| Linked Fate | 0.0624+ | 0.0503 | 0.0440 | 0.0140 | 0.0258 | 0.0177 |
| | (0.0355) | (0.0355) | (0.0346) | (0.0334) | (0.0335) | (0.0343) |
| General Distrust | | 0.153*** | 0.161*** | 0.107* | 0.131** | 0.124* |
| | | (0.0401) | (0.0418) | (0.0436) | (0.0473) | (0.0471) |
| Recent Stop | | | 0.405*** | 0.392*** | 0.372*** | 0.293** |
| | | | (0.0955) | (0.0922) | (0.0926) | (0.0947) |
| Stop Quality (reference: "Mostly Positive") | | | | | | |
| Neutral | | | | 0.285*** | 0.280*** | 0.263*** |
| | | | | (0.0723) | (0.0748) | (0.0717) |
| Mostly Negative | | | | 0.746*** | 0.723*** | 0.642*** |
| | | | | (0.0908) | (0.0928) | (0.0910) |
| Punished | | | | | 0.256** | 0.228** |
| | | | | | (0.0823) | (0.0843) |
| Discrimination | | | | | | 0.461*** |
| | | | | | | (0.0835) |
| Constant | 5.121*** | 4.750*** | 4.550*** | 4.599*** | 4.385*** | 4.364*** |
| R-sq | 0.095 | 0.100 | 0.111 | 0.133 | 0.137 | 0.150 |
| N | 2733 | 2733 | 2733 | 2733 | 2733 | 2733 |

Note: + = p<0.10; * = p <0.05; ** = p <0.01; *** p <0.001. Control variables coded as: Male (male = 1, non-male = 0); age (in years); income (categorical: less than $20,000, $9,999 increments from $20,000 to $99,999, $49,999 increments from $100,000 to more than $200,000); education (no high school = 1, less than high school = 2, high school = 3, some college = 4, associate's degree = 5, Bachelor's degree = 6, post-graduate degree = 7); linked fate (What happens to other African Americans has: nothing to do with my life = 1, only a little to do with = 2, something to do with = 3, A lot to do with = 4, a huge amount to do with my life = 5); ruralness (Large urban area = 1, Large suburb near large city = 2, Small suburb near small town or city = 3, Small town or small city = 4, Rural area = 5). Standard errors are in parentheses.

**Table 6. Overall Distrust in Police Model**

| | Model 18 |
|---|---|
| Recent Stop | 0.364*** |
| | (0.0957) |
| Distant Stop | 0.0411 |
| | (0.0554) |
| Male | –0.00701 |
| | (0.0788) |
| Age | –0.0210*** |
| | (0.00225) |
| Income | –0.0168 |
| | (0.0109) |
| Democrat | 0.161* |
| | (0.0689) |
| Education | –0.0441* |
| | (0.0180) |
| Ruralness | –0.0882** |
| | (0.0273) |
| Linked Fate | –0.00705 |
| | (0.0331) |
| General Distrust | 0.106** |
| | (0.0341) |
| First Stop Age | 0.0662* |
| | (0.0249) |
| Lifelong Stop # | 0.0114 |
| | (0.0335) |
| Stop Quality (reference: "Mostly Positive") | |
| Neutral | 0.210** |
| | (0.0657) |
| Mostly Negative | 0.557*** |
| | (0.0895) |
| Punished | 0.244** |
| | (0.0809) |
| Discrimination | 0.455*** |
| | (0.0792) |
| Constant | 4.282*** |
| R-sq | 0.147 |
| N | 3183 |

Note: + = p <0.10; * = p <0.05; ** = p <0.01; *** p <0.001. Control variables coded as: Male (male = 1, non-male = 0); age (in years); income (categorical: less than $20,000, $9,999 increments from $20,000 to $99,999, $49,999 increments from $100,000 to more than $200,000); education (no high school = 1, less than high school =2, high school = 3, some college = 4, associate's degree = 5, Bachelor's degree = 6, post-graduate degree = 7); linked fate (What happens to other African Americans has: nothing to do with my life = 1, only a little to do with = 2, something to do with = 3, a lot to do with = 4, a huge amount to do with my life = 5). Standard errors are in parentheses.

by a police officer seems to increase distrust in the police and that remains true regardless of the characteristics of the encounter with the police. A police stop may be positive and avoid discrimination in a way that decreases distrust and the stop itself still may contribute to distrust. Overall, this supports hypotheses H1A and H1B with stronger support for H1B. Recent stops seem especially important for distrust in the police.

At the same time, although mere police stops can increase distrust, the characteristics of encounters also do so. Receiving a punitive outcome like a citation or arrest were positively and significantly associated with police distrust, consistent with research into that topic (Cochran and Warren 2012; Reisig et al. 2018; Solomon 2019). It may not be possible to avoid earning distrust altogether, but the police can still minimize the magnitude of earned distrust. Discriminatory encounters increase distrust in the police, as do other kinds of negative encounters. The characteristics of a police encounter influence distrust above and beyond mere stops. Stops create distrust above and beyond the characteristics of that isolated stop. Additionally, while first stops early in life with the police can create distrust in the police, delaying stops could potentially ameliorate some small amount of that distrust. We find support for hypotheses H2, H4A, and H4B, with weak support for the hypothesis that age at first stop is associated with distrust. Overall, both police stops, and the characteristics of those stops, appear to influence distrust in the police, with neither being capable of obviating the effects of the other.

Consistent with our expectations, our models suggest that distrust in local government generally will create distrust with police departments. The relationship between more general institutional trust and more specific organizational trust is well-documented (Kettl 2017; Van der Walle and Bouckaert 2007). Distrust in a government generally leads to distrust in the constituent organizations of that government. To that extent, not each factor that influences distrust is entirely within policing's control. What happens in one part of government influences how people see other parts of government, and that reality tends to make distrust in general government and constituent parts move together. While distrust in local government creates distrust in constituent parts, distrust in in the police could damage distrust in general government (Soss and Weaver 2017).

To the extent that police can avoid stopping citizens, it would likely decrease distrust in police. Patterned racial inequity over time in police stops damages trust, diminishes the quality of citizenship that people experience, restricts movement, and creates expectations for how government functions (Epp et al. 2014). Police stops are not something that can be avoided in all cases because some stops are necessary public safety interventions. Police departments can minimize coercive stops to the extent that is congruent with public safety to decrease distrust. When stops cannot be avoided, the distrust that arises from stops can be lessened through high quality interactions that avoid discrimination. Departments cannot control all factors that influence distrust in the police, like general distrust in government, socio-demographic factors, or the already-completed work of police officers. To an extent, departments cannot control all aspects of what influences citizens' distrust in the police. However, to the extent that departments can control stops, stop quality, and stop discrimination, doing so would likely decrease distrust in the police.

## Limitations

One limitation of this study is the sample socio-demographics, specifically racial socio-demographics. We looked at African American distrust in the police because African American distrust in the police is relatively high and because of ongoing discourses about racial inequity in policing. Decreasing distrust in the police among African Americans is an important goal for policing from three standpoints: normative, equity, and operational. At the same time, the relationship between distrust and the factors considered may generalize to other socio-demographic groups. While we examine African American police contact because it is crucially high, findings in this research may apply to other groups.

We also would like to reiterate that this survey is limited to noninstitutional populations and cannot represent people currently incarcerated or otherwise held in criminal justice systems or other residential institutions. Additionally, our data did not contain information about perceptions of transparency in local governments and local police departments, which would likely also have had an independent influence on distrust in the police (Cooper et al. 2008; Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013; Porumbescu 2017).

Our study is associational. This means that while we have some confidence pointing to a relationship between the factors considered and distrust, we cannot provide precise specifications as to the magnitude of this relationship. Instead, we are comfortable asserting that there is likely a positive relationship between distrust, stops, and stop characteristics without asserting much in terms of a specific magnitude.

One direction for future research may include a more causal analysis. Another direction would be to examine the implications that this data has for procedural justice research. That research area looks at how people form attitudes toward the police from police processes and postulates that it is the fairness of the process, rather than the quality of the outcome of a police stop that matters for how people see police (Donner et al. 2015; Sunshine and Tyler 2003). An additional direction would be to consider the extent to which distrust in the police influences distrust in government generally, perhaps comparatively with another commonly encountered service like education. This is because distrust in a specific government may influence the formation of attitudes toward general government.

## Conclusion

When people distrust government, they are less likely to work with government, respect government, and listen to government (O'Brien et al. 2019). Government is operationally better off when citizens believe it to be worthy of their trust. The benefits of trust, however, can be difficult to reap for government agencies whose missions are often coercive or punitive. Those sorts of interactions cannot realistically be expected to engender trust in most cases. It may very well be that there are scarce ways to give a traffic citation that increases trust in the officer giving it, much less the enforcement of even more serious laws against those creating detriment to public safety. Less coercive models of policing exist (Alpert et al. 2001), but we expect that, for the foreseeable future, coercive, punitive, and investigatory models will also remain in many departments. Given the nature of policing, police departments cannot always overcome the barrier between distrust and trust, but they can minimize the magnitude of distrust by avoiding unnecessary stops and providing nondiscriminatory high-quality experiences.

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## Appendix. Table A Distrust Effect of First Contact Age, Including with No Contact

| | Model 1a | Model 2a | Model 3a | Model 4a | Model 5a | Model 6a |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| First Stop Age | –0.0445+ | –0.0444+ | –0.0109 | 0.0439 | 0.0528+ | 0.0620* |
| | (0.0239) | (0.0241) | (0.0245) | (0.0275) | (0.0265) | (0.0251) |
| Male | 0.118+ | 0.143* | 0.0954 | 0.0714 | 0.0286 | 0.000803 |
| | (0.0621) | (0.0628) | (0.0593) | (0.0711) | (0.0734) | (0.0734) |
| Age | –0.0232*** | –0.0233*** | –0.0207*** | –0.0228*** | –0.0221*** | –0.0209*** |
| | (0.00184) | (0.00183) | (0.00188) | (0.00221) | (0.00223) | (0.00225) |
| Income | –0.0232* | –0.0219* | –0.0228* | –0.0196+ | –0.0171 | –0.0170 |
| | (0.00957) | (0.00974) | (0.00959) | (0.0111) | (0.0110) | (0.0109) |
| Democrat | 0.207** | 0.241*** | 0.244*** | 0.167* | 0.170* | 0.159* |
| | (0.0620) | (0.0636) | (0.0646) | (0.0694) | (0.0686) | (0.0686) |
| Education | –0.0545* | –0.0548* | –0.0560** | –0.0517* | –0.0461* | –0.0425* |
| | (0.0210) | (0.0210) | (0.0207) | (0.0194) | (0.0195) | (0.0178) |
| Ruralness | –0.0708** | –0.0740** | –0.0679** | –0.0832** | –0.0845** | –0.0877** |
| | (0.0225) | (0.0225) | (0.0216) | (0.0262) | (0.0266) | (0.0272) |
| Linked Fate | 0.0383+ | 0.0295 | 0.0278 | –0.0139 | –0.000331 | –0.00749 |
| | (0.0224) | (0.0224) | (0.0224) | (0.0335) | (0.0333) | (0.0328) |
| General Distrust | | 0.125*** | 0.146*** | 0.0856** | 0.111** | 0.105** |
| | | (0.0282) | (0.0299) | (0.0309) | (0.0338) | (0.0337) |
| Recent Stop | | | 0.553*** | 0.488*** | 0.441*** | 0.352*** |
| | | | (0.0787) | (0.0836) | (0.0854) | (0.0877) |
| Stop Quality (reference: "Mostly Positive") | | | | | | |
| Neutral | | | | 0.230** | 0.225** | 0.212** |
| | | | | (0.0677) | (0.0694) | (0.0667) |
| Mostly Negative | | | | 0.697*** | 0.653*** | 0.565*** |
| | | | | (0.0906) | (0.0926) | (0.0880) |

| | Model 1a | Model 2a | Model 3a | Model 4a | Model 5a | Model 6a |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Punished | | | | | 0.291*** | 0.257** |
| | | | | | (0.0757) | (0.0784) |
| Discrimination | | | | | | 0.460*** |
| | | | | | | (0.0823) |
| Constant | 5.442*** | 5.113*** | 4.677*** | 4.702*** | 4.396*** | 4.322*** |
| R-sq | 0.080 | 0.083 | 0.103 | 0.129 | 0.135 | 0.147 |
| N | 4035 | 4035 | 4035 | 3183 | 3183 | 3183 |

Note: + = p <0.10; * = p <0.05; ** = p <0.01; *** p <0.001. Control variables coded as: Male (male = 1, non-male = 0); age (in years); income (categorical: less than $20,000, $9,999 increments from $20,000 to $99,999, $49,999 increments from $100,000 to more than $200,000); education (no high school = 1, less than high school =2, high school = 3, some college = 4, associate's degree = 5, Bachelor's degree = 6, post-graduate degree = 7; linked fate (What happens to other African Americans has: nothing to do with my life = 1, only a little to do with = 2, something to do with = 3, A lot to do with = 4, a huge amount to do with my life = 5); ruralness (Large urban area = 1, Large suburb near large city = 2, Small suburb near small town or city = 3, Small town or small city = 4, Rural area = 5). Standard errors are in parentheses. Table 4 includes only those who have had at least one contact with the police.