

Police Violence Exposure Among Young Adults in a U.S. National Probability Sample

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Abstract

Police violence is a critical social determinant of health in the United States, but there is an absence of data on prevalence and sociodemographic disparities from national probability samples. This study aimed to determine the past-year prevalence of physical, sexual, psychological, and neglectful police violence exposure among young adults in the United States and to identify inequities in exposure. We conducted a cross-sectional analysis of the National Survey of Poly-Victimization and Suicide Risk, a population-based probability sample of noninstitutionalized young adults (18–29 years; $N = 1,077$) drawn from the nationally representative AmeriSpeak Panel. Logistic regression was used to test for associations between self-reported and census-based sociodemographic characteristics and past-year exposure to police violence (outcome), assessed using the previously validated Police Practices Inventory. Past-year police violence was widely reported among

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this general population sample (physical: 4.0%; sexual: 3.3%; psychological: 8.5%; neglect: 7.5%), equating to an estimated 2.1 million young adults exposed to physical violence and 1.7 million exposed to sexual violence. All police violence measures were associated with race/ethnicity in unadjusted analyses, with some outcomes also associated with gender identity, socioeconomic status, urbanicity, and region of residence. Black (non-Latine) race was the only consistent correlate of all four sub-types of police violence exposure in the adjusted analyses. Expanding upon prior studies that used nonprobability samples in select U.S. cities, we found that police violence is experienced by a substantial minority of the U.S. young adult population, and that ethnoracial disparities generalize beyond urban centers to a nationally representative sample.

Keywords

police, brutality, excessive force, race, disparities, prevalence

Introduction

The use of excessive force or violent tactics by the police toward civilians, or police violence, is a critical yet understudied social determinant of health in the United States (Alang et al., 2017; Cooper & Fullilove, 2016; DeVlyder et al., 2020), impacting a range of outcomes, including health and mental health symptoms (Bowleg et al., 2020; DeVlyder et al., 2017, 2018; Gearhart et al., 2023; Hoggard & Lutchman, 2024; Jun et al., 2020), sleep disturbances (Jackson et al., 2024; Kim et al., 2024; Venkataramani et al., 2024), and mortality (GBD 2019 Police Violence U.S. Subnational Collaborators, 2021), among others (DeVlyder et al., 2022). Although fatal instances of police violence are less common, they have been the main focus of the burgeoning body of police violence research to date. However, the available epidemiological evidence from local studies in U.S. cities documents high rates of direct exposure to nonfatal police violence, with 12-month prevalence estimates ranging from 3.2% for sexual violence to 13.2% for psychological abuse (DeVlyder et al., 2018). Studies using a range of methodologies have shown that the level of exposure and impact of police violence may be even greater for people from marginalized racial/ethnic, sexual, and gender identity groups, and those of lower socioeconomic status (SES; Duncan et al., 2024; Green et al., 2024; Jackson et al., 2024; Purvis & Blanco, 2020). While informative, these data are all derived from nonprobability samples and are limited to a relatively small subset of U.S. cities.

Nationally representative probability data from the Bureau of Justice Statistics Police-Public Contact Survey (Tapp & Davis, 2024) yields similar disparities in rates of exposure to excessive force (e.g., 6% of Black respondents reported threatening or nonfatal use of force in 2022, compared to 2% of white respondents and 1.5% of Latine respondents). However, the primary outcome measure conflates various types of use of force or violence, and the focus on “most recent contact” with police, rather than a defined time-period (e.g., past-year), precludes using these data to estimate overall national prevalence, particularly of individual subtypes of police violence.

The current study analyzes data from a national probability sample of young adults residing in U.S. households, focusing on youth in particular given prior evidence that adults in this age range are more highly impacted by police violence than middle-aged or older adults (DeVylder et al., 2017, 2018). These data will (1) provide the first estimates of the national prevalence of police violence in the United States; (2) test whether previously demonstrated associations with marginalized race/ethnicity, SES, and sexual and gender identity status generalize to the broader U.S. young adult population; and (3) provide the first opportunity for empirical tests of potential variation in rates between urban/suburban/rural settings, census-designated metropolitan, and nonmetropolitan areas, and across U.S. regions. The significance of studying the national prevalence of police violence, and its sociodemographic correlates, is to provide the foundational data needed to determine the appropriate magnitude and nature of response to this social problem, as well as to identify groups that may be most in need of targeted resources.

Methods

Sampling and Design

The National Survey of Poly-Victimization and Suicide Risk was an online cross-sectional survey administered in January 2021 to a national probability sample of U.S. young adults ages 18 to 29 (Fedina et al., 2023). Participants were recruited through the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) AmeriSpeak Panel—a probability-based survey panel of 43,000 households designed to represent the noninstitutionalized U.S. population. NORC used a mixed-modal recruitment strategy including address-based sampling and random digit dialing (landline and cell), which allowed for recruitment of participants without internet access. NORC provided compensation for all participants in their ongoing panel, supplemented with an additional \$3 cash incentive for completing this specific survey. The final sample included 1,077 young adults, representing a survey completion response rate of 15.7% and a

weighted household recruitment rate of 22.7%, accounting for the panel recruitment rate, panel retention rate, and survey participation rate. Weights were developed for sampling frames to adjust for differential probability of selection and to adjust for eligibility and nonresponse. Institutional Review Boards at the University of Michigan and University of Chicago approved all study procedures.

Measures

Demographics. Respondents self-reported race and ethnicity, combined into a single variable indicating (1) White, non-Latine¹, (2) Black/African-American, non-Latine, (3) Latine, (4) or other, defined as Asian, Native American, and other identities not included in the remaining categories and that did not include sufficient sample sizes for reliable prevalence estimates. Although race and ethnicity differ distinctly as cultural and sociopolitical constructs, we combine them into a single variable to reflect how individuals are, and have been, historically racialized in the United States. Of particular relevance to this study is the frequent conflation of race and ethnicity by state and institutional actors (particularly within policing), with populations racialized as Black and Latine disproportionately subject to police violence. At the same time, to preserve an analytic distinction between race and ethnicity, we explicitly define Black and White categories as non-Latine, aiming to mitigate the broader conflation of race and ethnicity in research on Latine populations.

In addition to race/ethnicity, respondents self-reported their gender identity (options: male; female; transgender male-to-female; transgender female-to-male; transgender do not identify as male or female; third gender or nonbinary; other), sexual orientation (options: heterosexual/straight; gay/lesbian/homosexual; bisexual; asexual; queer; not specified; not sure), and age (self-reported in years). Categories with low frequencies were collapsed to improve statistical power, creating composite variable attributes for transgender and LGBTQ+ respondents. Age was categorized into 18–24 and 25–29 years to correspond to census category cut-offs. Educational attainment (options: no high school; high school or equivalent; some college), household income (in four progressive categorical increments), and residence in a U.S. Census-designated metropolitan area were drawn from the sampling database. Participants self-reported their current setting of residence as urban, suburban, or rural.

Exposure to Police Violence. Exposure to police violence was assessed using the brief 4-item version of the Police Practices Inventory, a validated measure of past-year and lifetime exposure to physical, sexual, psychological, and

neglectful police violence (DeVylder et al., 2017, 2018), developed based on earlier qualitative work applying the World Health Organization's multifactorial definition of violence to the issue of police violence (Cooper et al., 2004). Following the prompt, "has a police officer ever. . ." respondents were specifically assessed for physical violence: "hit, punched, kicked, dragged, beat, or otherwise used physical force or a weapon (e.g., gun, baton, or Taser) against you?"; sexual violence: "forced inappropriate sexual contact on you, including while conducting a body search in a public place"; psychological: "engaged in non-physical aggression toward you, including threatening, intimidating, stopping you without probable cause, or using slurs?"; and neglectful: "did not respond, responded too late, or responded inappropriately to you after you called or summoned the police for help or assistance?" Each item included response options for lifetime and 12-month exposure and an option for multiple past-year exposures. Police violence variables were recorded into binary indicators of past 12-month police violence exposure (i.e., a yes response to either a single or multiple exposures in the past year).

Census-Based Measures. Region of the country and census-designated metropolitan area were recorded based on the respondent's current residence, using their address provided as part of their participation in the AmeriSpeak panel.

Data Analyses

Past-year prevalence of police violence exposure was calculated for the entire sample and within each subgroup of interest. Correlations between binary exposures to each police violence sub-type were assessed using the phi (ϕ) coefficient. Chi-square tests were used to examine unadjusted associations between each demographic category (e.g., race/ethnicity, age group) and each police violence variable (e.g., physical, sexual). Unadjusted analyses were considered significant at $p < .05$. Logistic regression was used to test for independent adjusted associations between sociodemographic factors and each police violence outcome. Sociodemographic factors associated with any of the four police violence variables in the unadjusted chi-square analyses were selected for inclusion as predictor variables in the logistic regression analyses. Analyses with missing data were conducted using listwise deletion, due to the low frequency of missing data (<1% of cases for all analyses). Adjusted associations between individual predictor variables and each police violence outcome were reported as odds ratios (OR) with 95% confidence intervals (CI). All analyses were considered significant based on a two-tailed $\alpha = .05$.

In addition to the primary logistic regression analyses, we conducted additional exploratory analyses to inform future work. While potentially

under-powered, we tested the associations between race/ethnicity and police violence for effect modification by gender identity, using nested chi square analyses, as a preliminary step toward quantitative intersectional analyses of police violence in the United States.

Results

Sample demographics are presented in Table 1, with the sample representing all four U.S. regions, urban and nonurban settings, with representative distributions by age, race/ethnicity, and gender, and reflecting the skewed distribution toward some college education and lower incomes as is present in this age range in the general population. The sample therefore closely matches the U.S. census distributions by race/ethnicity, gender, and metropolitan area residence for this age group (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), supporting its validity as a nationally representative sample of young adults living in U.S. households (for direct comparison with U.S. Census estimates on key variables, see Supplemental Table 2).

The 12-month prevalence rates of exposure to police violence in this sample were 4.0% for physical violence, 3.3% for sexual violence, 8.5% for psychological violence, and 7.5% for neglect (Table 1), with 14.9% reporting at least one exposure of any type. Exposures were highly correlated with one another, such that self-reported exposure to any single sub-type of police violence was associated with a greater likelihood of also reporting any other sub-type (phi coefficients ranging from .24 to .50, all statistically significant, two-tailed $p < .001$).

Race/ethnicity was significantly associated with physical, $\chi^2(3,1063) = 26.34, p < .001$, sexual, $\chi^2(3,1066) = 20.87, p < .001$, and psychological, $\chi^2(3,1062) = 37.37, p < .001$, police violence, and neglect, $\chi^2(3,1062) = 10.83, p = .013$ (i.e., highest prevalence among non-Latine Black for all sub-types). Gender identity was associated only with psychological, $\chi^2(2,1061) = 16.05, p < .001$ (greatest risk among male participants), and neglectful, $\chi^2(3,1062) = 9.76, p < .001$ (greatest risk among transgender participants), police violence exposure. Education was significantly associated with psychological violence, $\chi^2(2,1062) = 18.67, p < .001$, and physical violence, $\chi^2(2,1062) = 12.93, p = .002$ (i.e., < high school educational attainment at greatest risk). Income was also associated with psychological, $\chi^2(3,1061) = 24.40, p < .001$, physical, $\chi^2(3,1062) = 13.55, p = .004$, sexual, $\chi^2(3,1066) = 26.34, p = .002$, and neglectful violence, $\chi^2(3,1062) = 8.77, p = .033$ (i.e., < \$20,000/year at greatest risk for all sub-types). Urban residence was significantly associated with neglect, $\chi^2(2,1058) = 22.91, p < .001$, and physical violence, $\chi^2(2,1058) = 6.50, p = .039$. Region was only associated with

Table 1. Descriptive Data for the Included Sample.

Variable	N (%)
<i>Race</i>	
White, non-Latine	573 (53.2)
Black, non-Latine	150 (14.0)
Latine	244 (22.4)
Other	110 (10.2)
<i>Gender Identity</i>	
Male	510 (47.4)
Female	541 (50.2)
Transgender, Nonbinary, Other	26 (2.4)
<i>Sexuality</i>	
Heterosexual	873 (81.1)
LGBQ+	204 (18.9)
<i>Age</i>	
18–24 years old	601 (55.8)
25–29 years old	476 (44.2)
<i>Education</i>	
No High School diploma	116 (10.8)
High School graduate or equivalent	310 (28.8)
Some college or more	651 (60.4)
<i>Household Income</i>	
Less than \$20,000	235 (21.8)
\$20,000 to \$39,999	476 (44.2)
\$40,000 to \$84,999	208 (19.3)
\$85,000 and above	158 (14.6)
<i>Region</i>	
Northeast	184 (17.1)
Midwest	219 (20.3)
South	410 (38.0)
West	265 (24.6)
<i>Metropolitan area designation</i>	
Nonmetropolitan area	151 (14.0)
Metropolitan area	926 (86.0)
<i>Setting of residence</i>	
Urban	445 (41.3)
Suburban	382 (22.7)
Rural	382 (35.5)
<i>Police Violence exposure</i>	
Physical	43 (4.0)
Sexual	35 (3.3)
Psychological	92 (8.5)
Neglectful	81 (7.5)

Note. Values presented are unweighted percentages.

psychological, $X^2(3,1061)=11.84, p=.008$ (most frequently reported in the south), and neglectful violence, $X^2(3,1061)=11.76, p=.008$ (most frequently reported in the west). No other associations were significant, including any associations with sexual orientation, age, or residence in a metropolitan area. Prevalence rates by sociodemographic group are shown in Figure 1.

Adjusted odds ratios for all regression analyses are presented in Table 2. Physical police violence was associated with race/ethnicity in adjusted analyses, in that it was more common among non-Latine Black and Latine respondents compared to non-Latine white respondents, and was also less prevalent among those with at least some college education. Sexual violence was also significantly more likely among non-Latine Black respondents, and those with household incomes under \$20,000/year. Psychological violence was associated with race/ethnicity (more common among Latine and Black respondents compared to white respondents), more likely to be reported by males compared to female respondents, and least common among those with incomes over \$85,000/year. Neglect was more commonly reported by Black compared to white respondents and by transgender/nonbinary respondents and was the only outcome associated with setting of residence, being most common in urban (compared to suburban and rural) areas.

Finally, we conducted exploratory analyses to provide preliminary data on the intersection of race/ethnicity and gender identity (excluding trans/nonbinary respondents, given inadequate statistical power for this group). While the elevated risk among Black respondents (compared to white) was consistent across all outcomes for both males and females, the pattern was less consistent for Latine and "other" respondents (Figure 2). Among males, race/ethnicity was associated with all police violence variables, specifically, physical: $X^2(3,506)=20.91, p<.001$; sexual: $X^2(3,506)=16.19, p=.001$; psychological: $X^2(3,506)=34.62, p<.001$, and neglectful violence, $X^2(3,506)=16.76, p<.001$. For females, race/ethnicity was not associated with neglect, $X^2(3,532)=7.29, p=.063$, but was associated with all other outcomes, specifically, physical: $X^2(3,532)=8.33, p=.040$; sexual: $X^2(3,532)=10.57, p=.014$; and psychological: $X^2(3,532)=9.06, p=.028$.

Discussion

Main Findings

The national debate in the United States regarding the causes, pervasiveness, and impact, of police violence has suffered from a lack of national data on rates of exposure and its sociodemographic correlates. To our knowledge, this study presents the first data on the past-year prevalence of nonfatal police

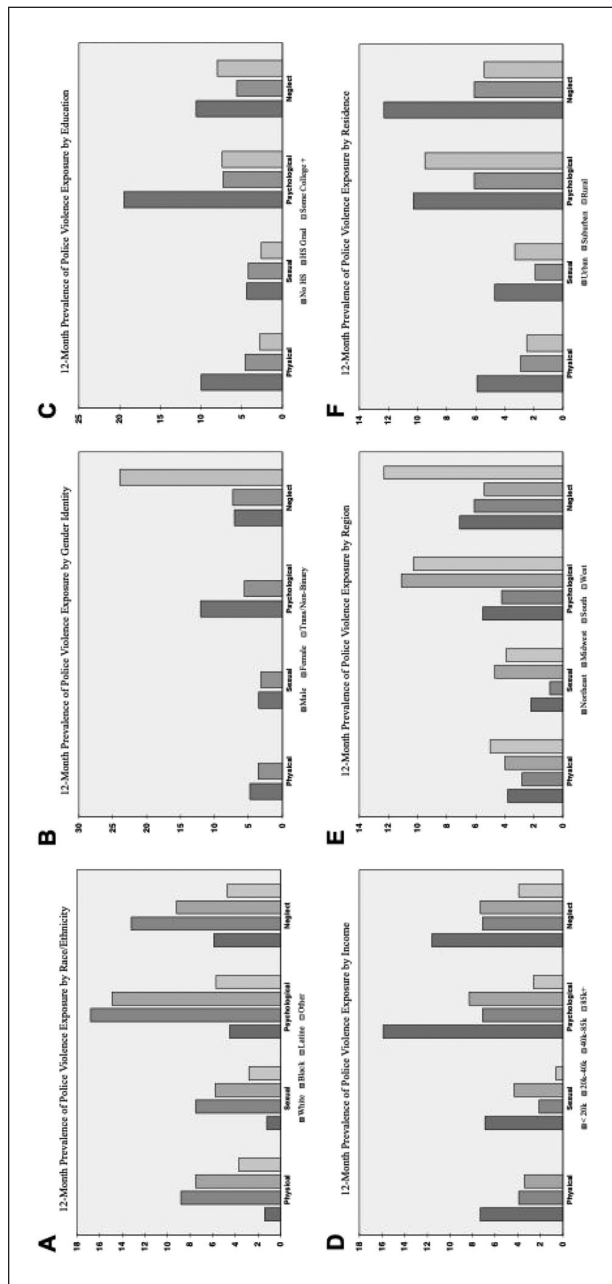


Figure 1. Twelve-month prevalence of police violence by demographic group. Prevalence rates are shown for (A) by race/ethnicity, (B) by gender identity, (C) by education, (D) by income, (E) by U.S. region of residence, and (F) by urban/suburban/rural setting of residence.

Table 2. Odds Ratios With 95% Confidence Intervals for All Fully Adjusted Logistic Regression Analyses.

Variable	Physical	Sexual	Psychological	Neglectful
<i>Race</i>				
White, non-Latine	—	—	—	—
Black, non-Latine	4.87 [1.86, 12.71]*	4.35 [1.56, 12.16]*	3.00 [1.58, 5.68]*	2.53 [1.29, 4.96]*
Latine	4.28 [1.73, 10.59]*	3.01 [1.15, 7.84]	2.47 [1.39, 4.42]*	1.27 [0.69, 2.33]
Other	2.07 [0.56, 7.62]	1.90 [0.49, 7.37]	1.04 [0.41, 2.65]	0.73 [0.27, 1.94]
<i>Gender Identity</i>				
Male	—	—	—	—
Female	0.72 [0.37, 1.40]	0.78 [0.38, 1.61]	0.35 [0.21, 0.57]*	1.02 [0.62, 1.68]
Transgender, Other	na	na	na	4.00 [1.38, 11.57]*
<i>Education</i>				
No HS diploma	—	—	—	—
HS graduate	0.54 [0.22, 1.33]	1.67 [0.55, 5.06]	0.41 [0.20, 0.84]	0.66 [0.28, 1.56]
Some college	0.33 [0.14, 0.78]*	1.02 [0.35, 2.95]	0.49 [0.26, 0.92]	1.13 [0.53, 2.42]
<i>Household Income</i>				
Less than \$20,000	—	—	—	—
\$20,000 to \$39,999	0.66 [0.31, 1.42]	0.32 [0.13, 0.77]*	0.50 [0.28, 0.87]	0.69 [0.38, 1.23]
\$40,000 to \$84,999	0.63 [0.24, 1.69]	0.92 [0.37, 2.32]	0.59 [0.30, 1.18]	0.67 [0.32, 1.38]
\$85,000 and above	0.06 [0.00, 1.40]	0.18 [0.03, 1.22]	0.24 [0.08, 0.68]*	0.33 [0.12, 0.92]
<i>Region</i>				
Northeast	—	—	—	—
Midwest	0.75 [0.23, 2.48]	0.55 [0.09, 3.33]	0.63 [0.24, 1.69]	0.79 [0.34, 1.83]
South	0.76 [0.30, 1.94]	1.87 [0.57, 6.11]	1.58 [0.74, 3.36]	0.61 [0.29, 1.27]
West	1.04 [0.38, 2.87]	1.98 [0.55, 7.10]	1.54 [0.68, 3.50]	1.65 [0.80, 3.39]
<i>Setting of residence</i>				
Urban	—	—	—	—
Suburban	0.82 [0.38, 1.79]	0.52 [0.20, 1.32]	0.82 [0.46, 1.44]	0.35 [0.19, 0.65]*
Rural	0.39 [0.15, 1.01]	0.75 [0.31, 1.79]	0.94 [0.53, 1.67]	0.31 [0.15, 0.64]*

Note. na denotes that the odds ratio could not be calculated due to low cell sizes.

*denotes statistical significance based on Bonferroni adjusted $\alpha = .013$.

violence among a national probability sample of young adults. We found that police violence exposure is, when considering the potential severity of the exposure, not rare or unusual among the general population of young adults in the United States, with 4% reporting past-year exposure to physical violence from police officers and 3.3% reporting past-year exposure to sexual

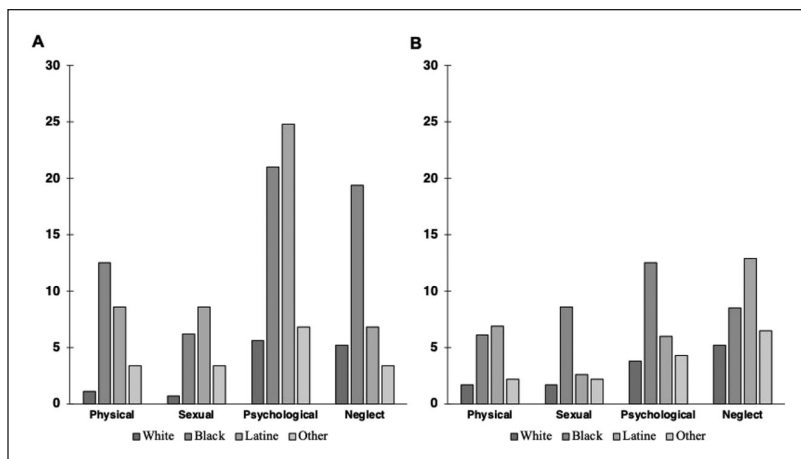


Figure 2. Twelve-month prevalence of police violence by intersections of race and gender. Prevalence rates are shown by race/ethnicity for (A) males and (B) females separately. The transgender sample size was not sufficient for intersectional analyses.

violence. Less severe exposures, including psychological violence (e.g., threatening or discriminatory language) and neglectful violence (i.e., failing to prevent violence when expected to do so) were more common, reported by 8.5% and 7.5% of respondents, respectively.

Twelve-month prevalence rates in this study are comparable to those in the Survey of Police Public Encounters, collected in 2017 among adults (age 18+, no upper limit) in New York City and Baltimore using an earlier variation of the same measure, finding similar but somewhat higher rates compared to the present study (DeVylder et al., 2018). The difference may reflect the setting if rates are particularly high in those selected cities compared to the United States as a whole. Further, data from the present study were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic, when social distancing measures were in effect and there may have been reduced time spent in public (and therefore less incidental contact with the police) on average across the population. The data collection period also coincided with widespread protests against police violence following the death of George Floyd, which may have impacted rates of exposure to police violence, with some evidence suggesting that rates declined in areas with widespread protest (Campbell, 2024). While the rates in the present study were lower than those of the Survey of Police-Public Encounters studies, they were higher than those found in the Bureau of Justice Statistics Police Public Contact Survey, which likely reflects our focus on

past-year exposures rather than the respondent's most recent contact with police, regardless of timeframe (Tapp & Davis, 2024). Despite this variability in prevalence rates across studies, even the most conservative estimates translate to a significant population-level impact, cumulating in a substantially greater risk for negative health (Alang et al., 2021, 2023; Quinn et al., 2024; Thompson et al., 2021), mental health (Bowleg et al., 2020; DeVlyder et al., 2017, 2018), and related outcomes among those directly exposed and those exposed indirectly through friends, family, neighbors, their community, and other sources (Green et al., 2024; Haile et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2024; Kincade & Fox, 2022; Quinn et al., 2024; Read et al., 2023).

Sociodemographic Correlates

Police violence exposure was broadly associated with race and ethnicity, in that all sub-types of violence were disproportionately more likely to be reported by non-Latine Black respondents and, to a lesser extent (and excluding neglect), by Latine respondents. Ethnoracial disparities have been repeatedly found across prior studies of police violence in the United States, with consistently elevated rates of police violence exposure among non-Latine Black respondents in both Survey of Police-Public Encounter studies (DeVlyder et al., 2017, 2018), the Bureau of Justice Statistics Police Public Contact Survey (Tapp & Davis, 2024), and other data sources (Fryer, 2019). All subtypes were also associated with at least one indicator of lower SES, income or educational attainment. Male respondents were more likely to report psychological violence and transgender/nonbinary respondents more likely to report neglect but, surprisingly, no other forms of police violence. Notably, in our preliminary intersectional analyses (which should be replicated in more adequately powered samples), ethnoracial variation in likelihood of reporting police violence appears to be consistent between males and females (excepting neglect, which was nonsignificant in females). Nonsignificant effects for transgender respondents are notably not congruent with the limited past research on this topic, which have broadly reported greater rates of police violence exposure among transgender compared to cisgender individuals (DeVlyder et al., 2017, 2018; Stenersen et al., 2022), and may reflect the small sub-sample of this group ($n=25$). Data from two earlier prevalence studies, in contrast, found significantly elevated reporting of all subtypes of police violence among transgender respondents (DeVlyder et al., 2017, 2018). These two prior survey studies (which were drawn from selected Northeastern cities rather than national samples) likewise found elevated rates of physical and sexual violence exposure among male compared to female respondents, which were not replicated here. Given the small

subsample of transgender respondents, null results in the present should not negate these previous findings of elevated rates of police violence exposure among transgender adults, and this question should be explored further in future studies with targeted over-sampling. Statistical power may also explain the nonsignificant results by sexual orientation which, as with any potentially under-powered null result, should be interpreted with caution.

While the prevalence of police violence exposure varied widely by demographic group, it is notable that no group was immune. This is consistent with a prior latent class analysis of data from four Northeastern cities that failed to identify a “no exposure” group (Salas-Hernández et al., 2022). Rates were relatively stable across regions, other than for psychological and neglectful violence which peaked in the south and west (unadjusted analyses only), respectively, and between census-designated metropolitan and nonmetropolitan areas. When using self-reported residence data, neglectful police violence was most common in urban settings in fully adjusted analyses, although no other exposure varied by urbanicity. Taken together, we should consider police violence to be an issue that disproportionately affects ethnoracially minoritized groups and people with lower SES across the country, and one that will likely require federal policy solutions, supplemented by local efforts to address police neglect (i.e., failure to prevent violence when expected to do so) targeted toward urban settings.

Race and Ethnicity: Key Associations on a National Level

The role of police violence in U.S. society has been widely contested. Perspectives generally considered liberal or progressive argue that police violence is either a consequence of societal racism or a deliberate mechanism to reinforce structural inequalities; in contrast, views typically framed as conservative maintain that police violence reflects an equitable response to societal variation in rates of crime perpetration—views that are also highly variable by race in the United States (Cooley et al., 2019; Drakulich et al., 2023; Litterer, 2024; Vitro et al., 2022). Despite these diverging perspectives, police violence is a notable issue that drastically sets the United States apart from other economically advanced nations; for example, cross-national comparison study of 14 countries, the rate of fatal police shootings in the United States was approximately 5× greater than that of Canada and 13× greater than that of Netherlands, the highest-ranking European nation in the study (Hirschfield, 2023). Several countries in that study (i.e., Denmark, Finland, Spain, and Norway) reported no police killings, relative to 1,021 in the United States. Further, police violence in the United States is significantly over-represented among ethnoracially marginalized groups, particularly among non-Latine

Black Americans (GBD 2019 Police Violence U.S. Subnational Collaborators, 2021). These long-standing disparities are well documented and further supported here by national probability sample data and adjusted analyses, which indicate race as the factor most consistently associated with all types of police violence, even when considering SES and other marginalized statuses. This carries significant structural implications, raising critical questions about (1) the presumed safety of policing given its continued operation as a site of racialized violence, and (2) the responsibility of researchers in advocating for systemic change to address the structural racism underlying this violence.

Racial disparities in exposure to police violence may arise through structural racism operating through multiple pathways, including residential segregation, concentrated disadvantage, and racially stratified patterns of police surveillance that contributed to an increased *probability of, and frequency of, police contact* among Black and other marginalized populations (DeVylder et al., 2022; Peterson & Krivo, 2005). As such, police violence functions as a population-level stressor with both direct and vicarious exposure pathways, consistent with fundamental cause frameworks and contributing to racial disparities in mental and physical health outcomes (Phelan & Link, 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Prior epidemiologic evidence demonstrates that these structurally patterned exposures persist independent of individual-level behavior or criminal involvement, supporting the interpretation of race as a proxy for differential exposure to institutionalized risk rather than a causal attribute (Alang et al., 2017; F. Edwards et al., 2019; Ross, 2015).

Clinical and Policy Implications

Previous studies have documented the extensive clinical correlates of direct and indirect police violence exposure (for review, see DeVylder et al., 2020, 2022; Haile et al., 2023; Herd, 2025; Motley et al., 2024), although there are no current guidelines informing how to address this issue in clinical practice. This is especially of concern for young adults, as police violence exposure may shape their sense of safety during a critical developmental period. At the minimum, the high prevalence rate and notable ethnoracial disparities suggest the need to screen for this exposure and offer appropriate health and mental health support for marginalized groups, possibly through primary care or emergency departments. Such screening should focus on sexual and physical violence, which has previously been shown to be particularly impactful in terms of its impact on mental health (DeVylder et al., 2017, 2018), although significant psychological or neglectful violence (e.g., if the injury was due to inadequate police intervention) can also have an impact and may likewise benefit from clinical identification and response. The development of

responsive and targeted interventions is warranted given the relatively high frequency of exposure to police violence in the United States, but as of now no specific interventions exist to the best of our knowledge.

The centrality of structural racism as a key mechanism underlying disparities in police violence exposure suggests that public health or policy interventions to address or prevent systemic and structural racism may in turn reduce rates of police violence exposure and related harms in the United States. Further, policy change may address other related factors that contribute to police violence (e.g., qualified immunity policies, firearm proliferation), which have been highlighted in recent theoretical work (DeVylder et al., 2022; Haile et al., 2023) but have generally not been empirically examined in relation to this issue. Supporting efforts in this direction, there is evidence that police violence *perpetration* is also impactful on police officers themselves by increasing the likelihood of PTSD symptoms (DeVylder et al., 2019). Thus, it can be considered in the best interests of both civilians and police departments to address this pertinent issue.

Considerations Regarding Measurement

The prevalence rates found in these data may be perceived as unexpectedly high and, given the paucity of existing data on this topic, difficult to put into context. This necessitates additional comment about the measures used to assess police violence exposure. The Police Practices Inventory, developed by our research team due to the lack (at the time) of a validated self-report measure of police violence exposure for use in survey studies, has been previously shown to have acceptable construct validity and test-retest validity in the Survey of Police-Public Encounters studies (DeVylder et al., 2017), with some evidence that positive responses (i.e., “yes” to survey items) correspond with supporting open text descriptions (i.e., write-in responses) of actual incidents (T. Edwards et al., 2023).

That said, validity and reliability does not necessarily inform us about the internal and subjective cut-off that respondents have in mind when determining whether to endorse “yes” or “no” in response to particular items. Therefore, while the probability sample design does conceptually allow us to extrapolate these prevalence rates to the general U.S. young adult household population, this should be done with caution due to the possibility that the threshold for what is being considered physical/sexual violence here may be low, potentially leading to over-estimates or an over-representation of milder incidents of physical/sexual contact. That said, a high prevalence of negative police encounters is feasible given prior evidence that police *stops* drastically outnumber police *arrests*, and that each stop has some potential for contact

that may be reported as excessive or violent (<https://www.ppic.org/publication/racial-disparities-in-law-enforcement-stops/>). Future research should continue to refine measures of police violence and aim toward replicating the prevalence rates presented here.

Limitations

Although the AmeriSpeak platform of NORC is a highly regarded data source, the response rates for selection into the panel and into our sample are low, posing a challenge to external validity, although, the demographic distribution of the data does correspond closely to the Current Population Survey. Nevertheless, our prevalence results would benefit from replication in different data sources. Further, recent analyses of more than 20 years of survey data have shown that response rates (which have stably declined over that same period, across survey modalities; Jabkowski & Cichocki, 2024) have negligible effects on significance or effect sizes of tests of association (Beehr et al., 2024), the primary focus of our study. Another potential limitation is the use of cross-sectional data, although considering that most of our exposure variables are either unambiguously present prior to the outcome (e.g., race/ethnicity), unlikely to be impacted by recall bias (e.g., educational attainment), or drawn from census data (e.g., residence in a metropolitan area), the cross-sectional design likely yielded similar associations as would be found in a prospective cohort design. Longitudinal designs may also allow us to understand the role of contemporaneous contextual effects (e.g., the widely publicized death of George Floyd shortly before this survey was administered), which may affect external generalizability, particularly in the context of shifting public attitudes.

The measures of police violence used in the present study are more detailed than in some prior studies (e.g., the National Survey of American Life used a single item from the Major Discrimination Scale; Oh et al., 2017), but still may not capture the nuances of interactions between the police and the general public. While the PPI is a validated measure of police violence exposure, it relies on the subjective experience of violence exposure and does not attempt to differentiate between unnecessary force and that which may be considered justified by the situation (e.g., threat toward an officer). The PPI has been validated in the general adult population, but more testing is needed to examine its measurement invariance across key demographic groups, including whether items are interpreted similarly across ethnoracial and income groups, and between urban and rural areas, all of which may influence respondent perceptions of what qualifies as normative behavior or

excessive force by the police. The version of the PPI used in this study also did not distinguish between physical violence with or without a weapon, as in the original measure, due to space constraints in the survey. As noted above, it also uses relatively broad definitions of each subtype of police violence (e.g., including both strip searches and sexual assault as “sexual violence”), which could be improved in future studies through more detailed quantitative measures or through validation with qualitative interviews. We also were not adequately powered to separately examine singular and multiple past-year exposures to police violence. In addition, alternative measures may more directly capture discrimination- or racism-related aspects of police violence (e.g., see measure development studies by Motley, Roh, et al., 2025 and English et al., 2017). Finally, some of the demographic items (e.g., education) may have benefited from a more inclusive list of response options (e.g., levels of college education).

Conclusions and Future Directions

The analyses presented herein should be considered preliminary estimates of the national impact of police violence and an initial examination of demographic factors that elevate one’s risk for experiencing police violence as a young adult. While more research is needed to understand other social factors that contribute to risk of this exposure and to better understand its impact on health, mental health, and other outcomes, several conclusions can be drawn from the current data. First, police violence is a widespread issue among young adults in the United States, which necessitates further targeted research and consideration of appropriate policy changes to begin to alleviate the impact of this exposure. Second, no group was immune to negative interactions with police, including white adults and those with the highest incomes. Third, while no sociodemographic group was immune to police violence exposure in our study, race/ethnicity (serving as a proxy indicator of differential social and environmental exposures, including systemic/structural racism; Adkins-Jackson et al., 2022; Norris et al., 2025) is unequivocally the dominant factor contributing to risk for police violence in these data, corroborating prior reports (for review, see Haile et al., 2023). Given these findings, and their consistency with prior evidence of racism-based policing (Bowleg et al., 2020; Motley, Williamson, et al., 2025) and racial disparities in overall exposure (reviewed in DeVylder et al., 2020, 2022; Haile et al., 2023), any steps to address this issue must prioritize addressing systemic and structural racism, and examine the role of police in maintaining that structure in modern U.S. society.

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Ethical Considerations

Institutional Review Boards at the University of Michigan and University of Chicago approved all study procedures.

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The authors declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

Data Availability Statement

Data are available upon request to Dr. Fedina, principal investigator of the National Survey of Poly-Victimization and Suicide Risk.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

1. Latine and Latinx are often used as gender-inclusive alternatives to Latino/a. In this manuscript, we have elected to use “Latine” given that it is a more linguistically accessible option in both English and Spanish for gender neutrality (Galvez, 2022; Miranda et al., 2023).

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Jacqueline Cosse, MSW, (Jackie) is a PhD candidate at the NYU Silver School of Social Work. Her research examines how carceral logics shape institutional responses to harm, focusing on the criminalization of intimate partner violence survivors under mandatory arrest policies. Grounded in Black feminist and queer disabled scholarship, her work aims to advance structural analyses and critical approaches that challenge carceral paradigms within social work research and practice.

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