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**POLICE ENCOUNTERS WITH JUVENILE SUSPECTS:
EXPLAINING THE
USE OF AUTHORITY AND PROVISION OF SUPPORT**

Executive Summary Report

Prepared for the National Institute of Justice
Project # 2000-IJOCX-0039

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**Police Encounters with Juvenile Suspects:
Explaining the Use of Authority and Provision of Support**

Stephanie M. Myers, Ph.D.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY REPORT
Prepared for the National Institute of Justice

Introduction

In recent years there has been growing concern about the incidence and seriousness of juvenile offending. This concern has not been unwarranted. Statistics gathered for the Sourcebook of Criminal Justice indicated a significant increase in the number of juvenile arrests, from year to year, during the late 1980's and throughout the early 1990's. One snapshot, in 1996, revealed that the number of juvenile arrests that year represented a 35 percent increase over 1987 while arrests overall had increased only 13 percent over the same time period (Sourcebook, 1997). The percent increase in juvenile arrests for 'violent offenses' was even greater over the same time period (see Worden and Myers (1999) "*Police Encounters with Juvenile Suspects*" report submitted to the National Research Council's Panel on Juvenile Crime: Prevention, Treatment, and Control). In addition, media portrayals of juvenile crime as increasing in frequency and seriousness, while not entirely accurate, affect public sentiment about juvenile troublemakers and about what might constitute appropriate responses from the juvenile justice system.

Despite evidence of a decline in the number of juvenile arrests as well as evidence of an overall decline in juvenile crime since the mid 1990's (Lynch 2002), public and political concern about juvenile offending remains high. Evidence of this sentiment is

noted by the nationwide increase in legislative action related to juvenile justice (for example, legislation which makes it easier to transfer youths from juvenile to adult court). In addition, due to the continued concern about the rising juvenile violent crime rate in the mid 1990's the National Research Council established a panel on Juvenile Crime to study both the variables related to juvenile delinquency and the responses and outcomes generated by the juvenile justice system. There is no denying it; across localities and states there are clear examples of changes in the way the juvenile justice system operates and in the goals and outcomes of the system.

While in-depth reviews of the juvenile justice "process" are under way, the police part of the process is often overlooked. Considering the police role in juvenile justice, this deficiency needs to be addressed; this was the objective of my research. While official statistics tell the story about the number of juveniles arrested and processed into the system, they only capture a fraction of the contacts that police have with juveniles and only a fraction of the information. Little is known about the rest of the story, about the nature of police juvenile encounters, the factors that shape police responses to juveniles in these encounters, and about those juveniles who have contact with the police and are subsequently released with a reprimand that is something other than a formal police response.

As gatekeepers to the juvenile justice system, the police are the social control agents who make the initial decisions about how to handle incidents involving juveniles. In deciding how to dispose of these incidents, the police have an enormous amount of discretion and a wide repertoire of responses available to them. In light of this discretion, one should be concerned with how police make decisions involving juveniles as it is an

important decision, one which may formally classify juveniles (correctly or incorrectly) as delinquents and introduce them to the juvenile justice system.

In addition, research on police decision making with juveniles is necessary so that we may increase our knowledge about the kinds of problems in which juveniles are involved, better understand how police make their judgments about juvenile suspects, and finally, so that we may later study the effects of police decisions - that is, the impact police-juvenile interactions might have on future juvenile offending and trouble-making.

This research utilizes data collected for the Project on Policing Neighborhoods (POPEN), an NIJ funded study of police in Indianapolis, Indiana and St. Petersburg, Florida, where data were collected through a method of systematic social observation of police officers and officer interviews. The data were collected during the summer months of 1996 and 1997, respectively. Observations of police patrol officers were performed by trained observers and the interviews were performed, in a private setting, by trained interviewers. The central purpose of this research is to increase our knowledge about police-juvenile encounters by examining the types of problems in which juveniles are involved (and interact with the police about), the ways in which police patrol officers handle their interactions with juvenile troublemakers, and how police outcomes are shaped by officer and situational characteristics. To examine police outcomes, this study focused on police use of authority (including but not limited to arrest) and police provision of support with juvenile suspects/disputants.

Descriptive Statistics and Independent Variables

Observers for the project on policing neighborhoods recorded information on 443 police-juvenile encounters where at least one juvenile was treated by the police as a suspect. In all, 654 juvenile suspects were involved in these encounters. Police interacted with one juvenile in 69% of encounters, with two juveniles in 20%, and three or more in only 11% of encounters.

In contrast from what research in the 1960's and 1970's show, encounters between police and juveniles are as likely to be initiated by police themselves as they are by some other source (e.g., a complainant). In addition, findings here indicate that police-juvenile interactions are more likely than not of a minor nature - but that there are times when the problem is a serious one. It is unlikely for a complainant to be present during these encounters and, when they are present, very few actually request that police take some specific action with juvenile suspects.

When police encountered these suspects they were most likely to interact with a minority male, who appeared to have a low level of wealth. A very small number of juveniles (42) showed indication of, or behaved as though, they were under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Twelve percent of juveniles were disrespectful to police.

Data collected through officer interviews (surveys) were used to test propositions about how police responses were shaped by officer (individual) characteristics and attitudes. These data were linked directly to the observational data by using officer identification numbers which had been assigned, for the purposes of the POPN project, to all officers working in the two police departments studied.

When juvenile suspects in these two cities interact with the police they are most likely to interact with a male, white officer who has some formal college education. In most encounters (almost 90%) the police officer was a regular ‘run’ or ‘911’ patrol officer while in approximately ten percent of encounters the officer was a community policing officer or specialist. However, regardless of this assignment, most officers had been exposed to some training in community policing. In three quarters of encounters the observed officer reported receiving at least one day of community policing training – and many officers had received more than one day of training. In addition, some officers had been exposed to training in mediation skills – though only 29% had received one day of training in mediation.

A total of six measures were constructed to examine officer attitudes. They include measures of officer cynicism about citizen willingness to cooperate, agreement about the importance of assisting citizens, attitudes about aggressive policing on the street and selective enforcement of the law, and role orientation. Officers were found to vary on these attitudinal measures. The influence of these attitudes on police behavior with juveniles is discussed below.

Dependant Variables: Authority and Support

For this research police outcomes are examined in terms of police use of authority and police provision of support. When police interact with juvenile suspects we can expect them to use their authority in some way. Typically, when we think of police authority we conceptualize it in terms of an arrest or some other formal police action; like a traffic ticket. Researchers often operationalize police authority by analyzing the arrest

decision. Of the 654 juvenile suspects encountered by police, 84, or 13% were arrested. However, these data also indicate that when police officers do not make an arrest they are still doing something to remedy the current situation and/or curb the future misconduct of juvenile troublemakers. Tactics that police use, other than arrest, often go undetected by traditional data sources (i.e., official police records). The types of police authority captured here include minimally coercive behaviors (e.g., making suggestions or requests) and range to more formalized, coercive, police responses like interrogating, searching, and issuing commands and threats to suspects. Only 6% of the 654 suspects were not subject to any of the forms of police authority studied for this project.

Police inquired about the nature of the problem with 45% of juvenile suspects, made a suggestion or request that the suspect leave the area, cease disorderly behavior, discontinue illegal behavior, or provide some information to 33% of juvenile suspects. Police lectured 22% of the suspects they encountered.

One might expect that police begin to handle problems with juveniles by using only slightly coercive tactics – and that the authoritativeness, or coercive nature, of the response will increase only when faced with resistance from the suspect or as the situation appears to be one of a more serious nature. Indeed, police did respond in a more authoritative, coercive, way with some juveniles.

Police took a report on the situation with 15% of juveniles, they interrogated 48% and police performed a search (either of the juvenile, their belongings, or the immediate area) in 20% of cases. Police threatened or commanded 38% of juveniles to leave the area, discontinue illegal behavior, or cease disorderly behavior. Only 3% of juveniles were issued a citation. Police decided to tell the parents or guardians about the suspected

wrongdoing or problem with 16% of juveniles. Although this is not a formal police response (like arrest) it is a response which could have more serious consequences for a juvenile (who now must deal with their parents at home), this police response carries more weight than investigative tactics and it usually involves more effort on the part of the police.

In addition to exercising their authority, police were found to rely on a more latent (or less recognized) part of their role by frequently providing support to juvenile suspects. It was expected that while police would use supportive behaviors to solve problems with juveniles, they would not use these types of responses as often as they would exercise their authority. This is indeed what the findings indicate, that while police do employ supportive behaviors they are not used as often as authoritative behaviors. This might be partly explained by the theory that police typically identify with the authoritative, coercive, part of their role and only latently with the supportive dimension (Cumming et.al., 1965). Inasmuch as this is true, one would expect police to respond to situations more often with coercion and less often with support and assistance (especially in encounters with suspects). However, one could also expect that contemporary officers generally identify more with the supportive dimension of their role as community policing ideals penetrate police departments.

For this research police behavior labeled as supportive included complying with a juvenile's request, providing information on how to deal with a problem, and providing comfort and sympathy. Like measures of police authority, the support measures were operationalized using coded and narrative data. Very few juveniles requested that the police provide assistance or information on how to deal with a problem – but when they

did make such a request police usually complied. Police were much more likely to provide information to juvenile suspects on their own initiative; almost 20% of juveniles were recipients. Fewer than 5% of juveniles were recipients of some other officer initiated support (physical assistance) and the same number were offered comfort or sympathy. Overall, about one quarter of juvenile suspects were recipients of police support or assistance – comparatively, almost 95% of juveniles were subject to some form of police authority and over three quarters were subject to fairly high levels of authority (ranging from investigative actions to commands and threats, and, at times, arrest).

Multivariate Analysis

To examine the extent to which police authority and support with juvenile suspects is shaped by situational and individual factors multivariate analyses were performed using several variations of the dependant variables (authority and support). Next, I will highlight some of the significant findings (statistically and substantively speaking), beginning with police authority.

Beginning with a binary measure of police authority, the decision to arrest or not, some parallels to previous research are revealed. First, the percent of juveniles arrested (13%) is consistent with previous research. Also consistent, and expected, are the findings that police are more likely to make an arrest when the problem is of a more serious nature, when they have sufficient evidence and when the juvenile is verbally or behaviorally disrespectful. Police are also more likely to arrest when there is a weapon present (this happened infrequently) or when the police know the juvenile prior to the

observed encounter. With the exception of victim preference for arrest (not found to have an effect here) it seems many of the same factors shaping the arrest decision twenty and thirty years ago continue to be influential today.

In addition to testing the temporal reliability and generalizability of those hypotheses, some additional hypotheses were tested as part of this research. For example, findings indicate that police decisions to arrest are also shaped to some extent by the presence of a supervisor at the scene. As expected, police are more likely to arrest a juvenile when a supervisor is present. Departmental influences are also apparent here as police in St. Petersburg were significantly less likely to arrest juvenile suspects than officers in Indianapolis. This finding supports the stated hypothesis, as the overall policing philosophy in St. Petersburg encompassed a softer, less aggressive, approach to community policing. This is also evidence to support a more general supposition; that police administrators can, and do, have some impact on police behavior.

While arrest may be considered the most coercive police action, it is not the only tool police have to restore order and solve problems with juvenile suspects. This research clearly shows through descriptive statistics that when police did not arrest juvenile suspects it is likely that police did something to resolve the situation. Because police authority is not only inclusive of arrest additional analyses were performed on nominal measures of police authority. These results are briefly summarized below.

Multivariate analysis of a more encompassing measure of police authority provides insight into how police decisions to arrest, issue citations or tell the juveniles parents, issue commands and threats, and perform investigative tactics – are shaped by individual and situational factors. For this analysis police authority is a nominal measure

where the *most coercive* police behavior during the encounter falls into one of five categories. From least to most coercive, these categories are: (1) released (where the juvenile was released or was simply asked to do (or not do) something); (2) investigative tactics (where police question the suspect or search the area or the juvenile); (3) issuing commands or threats (where police issues commands or threats to leave the area, discontinue behavior, etc); (4) issuing a citation or informing the juvenile's parents; (5) making an arrest. For this discussion, the reference category is release (1). The relationship between police authority and situational and individual factors will be discussed below. The full text reveals a much deeper analysis where the reference category varies to better understand police behavior.

Several relationships are noteworthy. First, police are more likely to take any of the authoritative actions (arrest, tell parents, issue commands or threats, perform investigative tactics) rather than release the juvenile when they have evidence of wrong doing and as the seriousness of the problem increases. This suggests that while police do not always make an arrest in these situations, they are likely to do *something* to try and curb the future problematic behavior of the suspect. Interestingly, another legal variable, apparent use of alcohol or drugs, had rather insignificant effects on police behavior. Police were more likely to issue commands and threats rather than release the suspect, though they were no more likely to make an arrest or tell the juvenile's parents when the juvenile appeared to be under the influence.

Second, there is little evidence here to support hypotheses about police use of authority being shaped by the race, sex, or level of wealth of the juvenile suspects. Unexpectedly, findings here suggest that police are more lenient with minority suspects.

One extra-legal factor, whether or not the complainant is a minority, suggests that police are significantly less likely to perform investigative tactics and less likely to tell juveniles' parents than they are to simply release a suspect in this situation. This suggests that perhaps police accord less priority to the concerns of minority citizens – however, it might also be the case that minority complainants are lobbying for the police to do nothing more than simply talk to juvenile troublemakers about the problem.

Third, the analysis of the more comprehensive measure of police authority reveals that the influence of having a police supervisor present at the scene is more complicated than one would surmise if basing interpretations on the analysis of the binary arrest variable. The nominal analysis suggests that police are not more likely to arrest than they are to release suspects when supervisors are present – but clearly the reference category is much different in this analysis. Additional analyses reveal that police are significantly more likely to arrest than they are to investigate or tell juveniles' parents and the full text reveals other subtle relationships between supervisor presence and police use of the authority. Clearly, having a supervisor at the scene of a police-juvenile encounter has some impact on the outcome of that police-juvenile interaction. This might mean that police are aware of how the supervisor would expect them to handle a situation – or that perhaps they decide to play it safe and 'go by the book' when their supervisor is watching. Other organizational influences are apparent here at a more general level and findings here support hypotheses regarding organizational (department) influences on police behavior.

Fourth, there is little evidence to support hypotheses about the impact of officer characteristics and attitudes on police behavior. The race and sex of the observed officers

were not significantly related to the use of police authority, and the overall impact of other characteristics was not significant. Further, while variation in police officer attitudes is documented, such variation appears unrelated to any patterned variation in police use of authority. Very few coefficients reached a level of statistical significance. With so few direct relationships between police use of authority and officer characteristics and attitudes, one might surmise that police authority with juveniles is shaped largely by the situation – or perhaps by individual factors not yet identified by researchers.

Like police use of authority, the second dependant variable examined, police provision of support, was examined two ways. First, as a dichotomous variable measured in terms of having provided some type of support or none at all. Second, as a trichotomous (nominal) variable measured, in ascending order (none to most supportive categories), where police provided no support, provided some support in the form of helpful information on how to deal with a problem, or provided support to juveniles in the form of physical assistance, comfort, or sympathy. The latter analysis will be briefly summarized as it provides a better understanding of police use of supportive behaviors in their interactions with juvenile suspects. The comparison category for the analysis consists of those juveniles who were not recipients of any police support.

The examination of police provision of support reveals several interesting findings. Perhaps most interesting is that unlike police use of authority with juveniles, police support is patterned more by officer characteristics than by situational factors. This is quite a divergence as police use of authority is patterned mostly by situational cues and hardly at all by officers' individual characteristics. With regard to supportive behaviors,

the only legal variable significantly influencing police behavior is evidence strength. Police are more likely to offer both types of support (information and comfort) than they are to provide no support at all when there is more evidence or wrongdoing. The seriousness of the problem has no significant impact on police providing support.

Few extralegal factors are found to have a significant impact. As expected, when the encounter takes place in a more socially disadvantaged neighborhood, police are significantly more likely to provide support in the form of physical assistance or comfort than they are to release the suspect without providing any support. Perhaps, as hypothesized, police suspect that juveniles encountered in these neighborhoods do not receive much informal guidance from their families or the community and are willing to step in and provide what they might surmise is missing. Also as expected, police are more likely to provide support to female suspects rather than release them but this only holds true for the more supportive category (comfort/sympathy/physical assistance) and not for the middle category where police provide information to help with a particular problem.

Many officer characteristics seem to influence police officers' likelihood of providing support to juvenile suspects. As hypothesized, minority officers are more likely than white officers to provide helpful information, officers with more time on the job are more likely to provide support to juveniles, and officers with more education are more likely than officers with less education to provide helpful information, and comfort and sympathy than they are to provide no support during the encounter.

There are some unexpected findings with respect to the relationship between officer characteristics and police provision of support. These findings may be of interest

to police administrators. Female officers, those with more training in community policing, and community policing specialists are all less likely, statistically speaking, to provide support to suspects than their counterparts. With respect to the findings suggesting that female officers are less likely to provide support than male officers, perhaps females who are drawn to the policing profession are different from how women have traditionally been characterized in our society (as more nurturing than males, etc.). Or it might be that female officers work hard to resist being typecast as a “typical female cop” and are less willing to balance a dual role of authority and support. Whatever the explanation, this research implies a significant difference in the ways in which police men and women provide support to juvenile suspects.

It is similarly peculiar that community policing officers and those officers with more training in community policing principles are less likely to provide support than their counterparts. These findings are difficult to interpret without knowing the intricate details of what community policing training (for patrol officers and specialists) consists. However, one would expect that even a more aggressive approach to community policing (as we know existed in one site) would encompass training on the use of support and assistance tactics and the police role as a service provider. At the least, these findings should raise questions about what it means to be a community policing specialist or to be trained on community policing principles and how this training translates to police behavior on the street.

There is little evidence here that attitudinal proclivities transcend to behavior. Three officer attitudes were significantly related to police provision of support, but the influence was not always in the hypothesized direction. For example, it was expected that

officers who had a broad definition of their role would be more accepting of, and more likely to provide support to juveniles than officers with more narrow definitions of their role. To the contrary, officers with broad role definitions were significantly less likely to provide support to juvenile suspects. This is difficult to explain, the finding seems atheoretical – or perhaps the measures of police role conceptions were inadequate or the theory was miss-specified. Beyond this, while a few subtle relationships emerge between attitudes and behavior (they are discussed in the full text), overall this research suggests that police attitudes explain little about police use of support with juvenile suspects.

Finally, as with police use of authority, organizational influences on police behavior emerge from the analysis of support. Police in St. Petersburg were significantly less likely to provide support to juvenile suspects than police in Indianapolis and this too is unexpected given the fact that the St. Petersburg police department was trying to implement a softer community policing style than administrators at the Indianapolis police department. This might raise some questions for police administrators about how their community policing philosophy translates to policing on the street.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this study informs police administrators, policy-makers, and police scholars about how contemporary police officers come to interact with juvenile suspects, the types of problems in which juveniles are involved, and how police respond to problems involving juveniles. This research shows that when police interact with juvenile suspects they are a source of both social control and support. Inasmuch as police use of authority and provision of support are analogous to outcomes, this study also informs us

on how outcomes are patterned by the situation, the officers, and to some extent the police organization.

Future research should focus on better specifying theoretical frameworks for police decision-making with juveniles. Findings here about the possible impact of the police organization suggest that similar studies conducted in both rural and urban areas would provide a better understanding of how police organizations and administrators influence police behavior on the street. In addition, our understanding of police use of discretion with juveniles would be enhanced by studying the decisions made by juvenile detectives. While patrol officers make the initial decisions about who gets processed into the system the next stop is often the juvenile unit or the juvenile detective. Enhancing our knowledge about the role they play would help us better understand which factors determine outcomes for juveniles as they make their way through the juvenile justice system.