

STUDY

DOES SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE SUPPORT THE WIDESPREAD USE OF SQFS AS A PROACTIVE POLICING STRATEGY?



A RESEARCH SUMMARY OF:

Weisburd, D., Petersen, K., & Fay, S. (2023). Does scientific evidence support the widespread use of SQFs as a proactive policing strategy? *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paac098>

TOPIC AREA:

- Pedestrian Stops
- Stop, Question, and Frisk (SQF)
- Proactive Policing

QUESTIONS ADDRESSED:

- What is the impact of pedestrian stops on overall crime and disorder and the health and future delinquency of individuals who are stopped?
- Does research confirm that pedestrian stops have negative impacts on community perceptions of the police?
- How should law enforcement agencies weigh the costs and benefits of pedestrian stops?



KEY FINDINGS

- The use of pedestrian stops (or Stop, Question, and Frisk) is a common but controversial proactive policing strategy. Advocates of pedestrian stops highlight the potential crime prevention benefits of this strategy. Critics note the low success rates – that is, the low proportion of stops that result in weapon seizure and arrest – and the potential harm to the individuals who are stopped by the police.
- Existing research evidence suggests that proactive pedestrian stop interventions can have crime prevention benefits, but these benefits are likely outweighed by the strong, negative outcomes experienced by the people who are stopped.
- Pedestrian stops can reduce crime and disorder in geographic areas. The review of findings from nine studies suggests a 13% reduction in crime in intervention areas when compared to non-intervention areas. These pedestrian stop interventions showed no evidence of the displacement (movement) of crime or disorder.

- Individuals' perceptions of the police appear to be negatively impacted by pedestrian stops. Across the nine studies examining this outcome, individuals who had been stopped by the police were significantly less likely to hold positive perceptions of the police compared to those who had not been stopped.
- The summary of findings from eight studies suggests that individuals stopped by the police were 46% more likely to be experiencing a mental health issue, such as anxiety, depression, and suicidality, when compared to individuals who had not been stopped.
- Four studies showed that stopped individuals had 36% higher odds of experiencing a physical health issue (e.g., sleep problems, functional limitations, self-reported poor health) when compared to individuals who had not been stopped.
- Pedestrian stops appear to increase individual's self-reported crime and delinquency. Individuals who had been stopped by the police self-reported 15% more crime and delinquency than those who had not been stopped.

METHODS USED:

- This study was conducted as a [Campbell Systematic Review](#) of available research evaluating policing interventions that use pedestrian stops as a primary component of the intervention.
 - A systematic review summarizes the best available evidence on specific questions.
 - Campbell systematic reviews are strategically developed to ensure the summary of evidence is comprehensive, methodologically sound, accurate, and unbiased.
- Research eligible for this review included any evaluation of pedestrian stop interventions produced between January 1970 to December 2021 that:
 - Involved a treatment group that received a pedestrian stop intervention and a separate comparison group that did not receive the intervention. The treatment group could be comprised of geographic areas or individuals.
 - Used a high-quality research design (i.e., randomized or quasi-experimental research design).
- Forty eligible studies and three supplemental reports were included in the systematic review. The majority of these studies were produced from evaluations in the United States and used quasi-experimental research designs. Nearly three-quarters of these studies used individuals as the unit of analysis rather than geographic areas.
- The authors summarized the available research findings to understand the degree to which pedestrian stops impact crime and disorder, public perception of the police, and individual's self-reported mental health, physical health, and involvement in crime and delinquency.

LIMITATIONS:

- The limitations of the underlying studies also limit the findings of this systematic review. There have been few strong, experimental evaluations of the impact of pedestrian stops.
- Though the available research reports a relationship between pedestrian stops and self-reported health and delinquency outcomes, the reliance on self-reported data collected at a single point in time limits our understanding of whether pedestrian stops are the cause of the negative outcomes.

HOW DO THESE FINDINGS APPLY TO MY AGENCY?



Existing scientific evidence does not support the widespread use of pedestrian stop interventions (stop, question, and frisk) as a proactive policing strategy.



Though pedestrian stops are correlated with reductions in crime and disorder, similar or even greater crime prevention benefits can be achieved through alternative proactive policing strategies (e.g., problem-oriented policing) that produce fewer community harms.



More research on the impact of pedestrian stop interventions is needed.

Notice: The Knowledge Lab is operated by the National Policing Institute, an independent 501(c)(3) organization. The Institute has selected and summarized this study without the involvement of its authors to aid in the sharing and implementing of research. The Institute recommends that readers use the hyperlinks to peruse the full article before using findings to make policy decisions. Summaries are not meant to encapsulate every piece of information from a study, but rather to serve as an accessible study overview highlighting key findings. The Institute can suggest related research and answer questions about the summary or related topics. The Institute explicitly credits each study's author(s) for their work, as cited, and does not claim any authorship for studies except where noted.

This project was supported by Grant No.15PBJA-21-GK-04011-JAGT awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance. The Bureau of Justice Assistance is a component of the Department of Justice's Office of Justice Programs, which also includes the Bureau of Justice Statistics, the National Institute of Justice, the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, the Office for Victims of Crime, and the SMART Office. Points of view or opinions in this document are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice.