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Event-level outcomes of police interactions with young people in three non-metropolitan cities across British Columbia, Canada)

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Event-level outcomes of police interactions with young people in three non-metropolitan cities across British Columbia, Canada

Abstract

This study examines encounters between youth and police to identify individual, contextual, and social factors that predict the outcome of these encounters. Young people aged 16–30 years were surveyed between May 2017 and June 2018 in three non-metropolitan cities across British Columbia, Canada. Outcomes were analysed using multinomial logistic generalized estimating equations. A total of 675 encounters were reported by 360 participants. These outcomes resulted in participants being questioned ($n = 227$; 33.6%); given warnings ($n = 132$; 19.6%); being searched ($n = 104$; 15.4%); being given a ticket ($n = 101$; 15.0%); and being handcuffed or arrested ($n = 111$; 16.4%). Young Indigenous people (vs. white) were significantly more likely to be handcuffed or arrested (OR=3.26; 1.43, 7.43). Statistical significance held after adjusting for history of police encounters and contextual factors. Findings suggest that police discretion, which has the potential to benefit youth, may be undermined by discriminatory applications of discretion.

Introduction

Experiences between youth and police have frequently been characterized by negativity, harassment, and mutual disrespect (Fagan & Tyler, 2005; Hinds, 2007; Mcara & Mcvie, 2005; Piquero, Fagan, Mulvey, Steinberg, & Odgers, 2005; Hinds, 2007; Stewart, Baumer, Brunson, & Simons, 2009). Young people have frequently reported procedurally unfair practices, discrimination, and harassment (Cunneen & White, 1995; Hinds, 2007; Stewart et al., 2009; White, 1993). In particular, young people who are marginalized and/or from diverse backgrounds appear to be disproportionately impacted by forceful policing (Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005). For instance, Owusu-Bempah and Wortley (2014) surveyed over 3300 Toronto high school students about encounters with police. These researchers found that black youth *without* a history of criminal involvement were significantly more likely to be stopped and searched than white youth *with* a history of criminal involvement – indicating a disproportionate frequency of racial profiling amongst black youth. Less is known about variation in experiences between police and young people impacted by other forms of marginalization, including those identifying as non-binary gender and Indigenous.

Highlighting the importance of studying this issue, concerns have been levied by researchers who claim that it may be difficult for young people to overcome the social impact of early encounters with police – leading to long-term entrapment within the legal system for what often begins as non-violent and low-level offenses (Nagin, Farrington, & Moffitt, 1995; Rasmussen, 1996). In their study, McAra and McVie (2005) show that police contact with youth not only fosters hostility towards the law, but also increases offending. Others who have studied patterns of policing suggest that officers may target young people – particularly those who are socially marginalized (Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2011). Regardless of the extent to which these problems manifest and define contemporary policing practices, there is significant public interest in ensuring that the encounters between young people and police are not only procedurally just (i.e., procedures follow criteria independent of a person's identity; Maskaly, Fridell, Jennings, & Donner, 2015), but also ultimately benefit young people and communities (Caputo, McIntyre, Wang, & Hodgkinson, 2018).

Previous studies of police have also highlighted the role that appearance, behaviour, and context play in shaping police decisions and how these decisions impact the outcome of police encounters (Dunham, Alpert, Stroshine, & Bennett, 2005; Novak, Frank, Smith, & Engel, 2002; Rowe, 2007). From the citizenry's perspective, however, the outcomes of police encounters must be meted out fairly, and not based on one's social position (e.g., age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status; Bronitt & Stenning, 2011) However, since the 1970s, policing responsibilities in Western countries have been encroaching into increasingly “low-level” offenses and have, for better or worse, repositioned police both as enforcers of the law, and “preventers” of crime, a stance lifted from the fields of social work and public health (Livingston, 1997; Roberts, 1976). Policing has also come to include greater focus on health and social issues, despite minimal training in these areas. As a result, the role of personal and social biases amongst police may play a greater role in shaping how police-youth encounters unfold than commonly assumed. The unfolding of these encounters in turn may influence the ultimate outcome that these encounters have on youth (Berry, 2019; Ross, 2018).

In Canada, much of the research on young peoples’ encounters with police has been conducted in Ontario and Quebec (Abbott, 2017; Fitzgerald & Carrington, 2011; Tator & Henry, 2006) or have focused on urban, metropolitan, and inner-city areas (such as Metro Vancouver; Meng, 2014; Omura, Wood, Nguyen, Kerr, & DeBeck, 2014; Sersli, Salazar, & Lozano, 2010; Ti, Wood, Shannon, Feng, & Kerr, 2013; Wortley, 2007). Studies suggest that social context, including city of residence, may shape young peoples’ attitudes towards police

(Taylor, Turner, Esbensen, & Winfree, 2001). Canadian government surveys and reports have singled out jurisdictions with distinct social ecologies that relate to the policing of young people, including rural and remote areas (Nuffield, 2003) and British Columbia (BC) specifically (Carrington & Schulenberg, 2003). For example, notably few (20–30%) apprehended youth have been charged in BC compared with those in other provinces (Carrington & Schulenberg, 2003); yet, the rating BC young people give police is consistently lower than counterparts in other Canadian jurisdictions (Cotter, 2015).

These and other studies indicate a need to evaluate the ongoing relationships between young people in non-metropolitan jurisdictions and the outcomes of police encounters across British Columbia. The current study aimed to understand event-level police encounters and outcomes reported amongst young people in three BC urban communities, including the salient situational, psychosocial, and individual factors that may be associated with these outcomes. We hypothesize that young people who exhibit greater social marginalisation – based on social identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender identity), situational context (e.g., time of day, substance use) or psychosocial factors (e.g., social support, quality of life) – will have higher odds of experiencing negative police encounter outcomes.

Methods

Data collection

Data on young peoples' encounters with police was gathered from the The Youth Experiences Project, which recruited participants between May 2017 and June 2018 using a community-informed mixed chain-referral and maximum variation sampling method in three BC municipalities: Victoria, Chilliwack, and Prince George. Additional information on study recruitment is provided in [Selfridge et al. \(2019\)](#). In brief, participants were approached by trained research assistants at restaurants, construction sites, high schools, universities, skateboard parks, and other downtown locales. Posters were also hung at local young people community service agencies, health clinics, cannabis dispensaries, and coffee shops, as well as distributed via Facebook and Instagram. Participants were encouraged to tell friends about the study. To facilitate recruitment of young people, regular office hours at youth community service agencies were offered. Interested individuals could also text, Facebook message, or call the contact information on the recruitment material to schedule an interview with research assistants. Eligibility criteria restricted participation to young people aged 16–30 who lived in the recruitment community for the past six months. As the study was designed to examine the

experiences of young people who used drugs (including cannabis, which was not legal at the time of this study), we aimed to recruit a sample where two-thirds reported more than weekly use and one-third reported less than weekly (or no) use. After informed consent was given, a questionnaire was administered to the participant by a trained research assistant and took approximately one hour to complete. Each participant received \$25 CAD. After data collection, all participants were offered five recruitment coupons and instructed to share these with eligible peers within one month. Participants who successfully recruited peers were remunerated \$5 CAD for each new participant who completed the study (maximum \$25 CAD). This study was reviewed by the research ethics board at the University of Victoria.

Explanatory variables

A series of questions about police encounters were repeated for up to three police encounters per participant. Participants were instructed to report on the most recent encounters, but it remained possible that they actually reported on the most salient ones. Explanatory variables ([Table 1](#)) included those related to: 1) individual demographics; 2) contextual factors; and 3) personal or social factors.

Table 1. Explanatory Variables.

Variable	Levels
<i>Age</i>	16–20, 21–25, 26–30
<i>Gender identity</i>	Male, female, non-binary
<i>Sexual orientation</i>	Heterosexual, other
<i>Ethnicity</i>	White, Indigenous, other
<i>Monthly income</i>	<\$663, \$664-\$1200, \$1201-\$2000, >\$2000
<i>Past police encounter</i>	0, 1–3 times, 4–10 times, >10 times
<i>Past drug dealing</i>	No, yes

Variable	Levels
Contextual	
<i>Time of day</i>	Morning/afternoon, evening/night
<i>Situational</i>	Biking or walking; driving or in a car as a passenger; hanging out (e.g., at a party, at work or school, at home); illegal activities (e.g., engaged in non-legal drug or under-aged alcohol use, in a fight)
<i>Reason</i>	looking for crime suspects, noise complaint, responding to call or overdose; road block or random check; suspected of drug possession, trespassing, public intoxication; violent encounter or disturbance, breaking up a party; traffic, jaywalking, or suspected intoxication while driving; other (e.g., problem with vehicle, didn't give a reason)
<i>Associates</i>	Alone/none, with friends, with parents/family/partner, with professionals/coworkers/other
<i>Drug use</i>	Yes/no
<i>Drug possession</i>	Yes/no
Personal and social	
<i>Social support</i>	The Medical Outcomes Study Modified Social Support Scale
<i>Public Visibility</i>	Public Visibility and Activities Scale
<i>Quality of life</i>	EUROHIIS Quality of Life Index

First, person-level explanatory variables included age at time of study (16–20, 21–25, 26–30), gender identity (male, female, non-binary), sexual orientation (heterosexual, other), ethnicity (White, Indigenous, other), and monthly income (<\$663 [i.e., provincial income assistance level], \$664-\$1200, \$1201-\$2000, >\$2000). To account for previous encounters with police which may have contributed to their encounters, participants reported the number of times they

encountered the police in the past five years (0, 1–3 times, 4–10 times, >10 times). Participants also indicated whether they had ever dealt drugs (no, yes).

Second, encounter-level explanatory variables, or factors specific to each encounter, included: the time of day; situation (what the participants were doing); police reason told to participant for encounter occurrence; the people or associates participants were with during the stop; whether the participant was using drugs at the time of the encounter, and whether they were found in possession of drugs during the encounter. These encounter-level factors were included as descriptive variables and to control for the confounding effect of specific contextual details of the event. Controlling for these variables as confounders in our multivariable approach allowed us to assess identity-related characteristics independent of the context of the encounters being studied.

Finally, to understand the social or personal factors that might explain outcomes, we included three scales: The Medical Outcomes Study Modified Social Support Scale (MOS-MSSS; [Gjesfjeld, Greeno, & Kim, 2008](#)), the Public Visibility and Activities Scale (PVAS; [Wortley & Owusu-Bempah, 2011](#)), and; the EUROHIIS Quality of Life Index (QOL; [Rocha, Power, Bushnell, & Fleck, 2012](#)). These three scales captured participants' quality of life, public visibility, and social support to test our hypotheses related to experiences of marginalized individuals, who often have less social support, lower quality of life, but are more publicly visible. First, the MOS-MSSS consisted of five items (e.g., "How often are the following kinds of support available to you if you need it...Someone you can count on to listen to you when you need to talk?") describing the frequency individuals have access to social support. Each item is scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "None of the time (1)" to "All of the time" (5). Final scores were calculated by summing the scores of each question. Second, the PVAS consisted of five items (e.g., "How often do you hang out on the street, outside of schools, or in the parks of your neighbourhood?") measuring public visibility. Each item is scored on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "Never (1)" to "Every day (7)." Final scores were calculated by summing the scores of each question. For each scale, scores were only calculated for individuals who answered all constituent items. Third, the QOL consisted of eight items (e.g., "How would you rate your quality of life?") measuring quality of life. Each item is scored on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "Very poor (1)" to "Very good (5)." Final scores for each scale were calculated by summing the scores of each question.

Outcome variable

A five-level variable was constructed from six questions regarding each police encounter (*“Did the police ask you for identification?”*; *“Did the police search you?”*; *“Did the police frisk or pat you down?”*; *“Did the police handcuff you?”*; *“If you were arrested were you taken into custody?”*; and *“What was the result or outcome of this encounter?”*). Participants’ responses were classified according to the most severe action taken by police during the encounter ranging from (1) “no action, questioned, or asked for identification;” (2) “warned and/or told to leave;” (3) “searched and/or frisked;” (4) “ticketed or given a citation;” to (5) “handcuffed or arrested.” This classification method was selected to distinguish beyond simple dichotomies of “any action vs. none.” While the experience of being ticketed or warned would be qualitatively distinct from the experiences of being handcuffed, our quantitative methods did not allow for such delineation. Although some salient distinctions exist between the concepts captured in each variable (e.g., search vs. frisk; handcuffed vs. arrested), these levels were selected due to either small counts in the otherwise mutually exclusive categories or due to concerns that participants did not understand the distinctions well enough to accurately control for misclassification bias. It is important to note that encounters were classified into the most severe outcomes that were reported during the encounter (e.g., participants who were arrested may have also been frisked leading up to the arrest, but were classified only as being arrested). This classification scheme was selected as our intent was not to estimate effects for each specific policing activity, but to identify the independent and adjusted factors associated with encounter-level outcomes.

Statistical analysis

All statistical analyses for this study were conducted in R (v. 3.5.2). Analytic criteria restricted inclusion to participants who stated that they had at least one police encounter in the past five years and who provided encounter-level descriptions for at least one police encounter over the past three years. Bivariable and multivariable multinomial logistic regression models were constructed using generalised estimating equations (known as GEE) with Huber-White standard errors from the `multgee` package (Touloumis, 2014). The referent level for all models was having “no action, questioned, or asked for identification.” In multivariable modelling, all theoretically appropriate variables were included and no artificial variable selection method was utilised. These models were used to identify the independent and adjusted factors associated with the outcome of police encounters, while also controlling for multiple observations per participant. Sensitivity analyses were also performed by using recruitment chain clusters as the clustering variable – however the effect on estimates and standard errors with and without these clusters

was negligible (likely due to the reality that most participants were not part of recruitment chains and due to the small number of participants in each chain). Likewise, comparisons of simple regression and multilevel regression models showed little to no effect of within-chain clustering but a significant effect on conclusions attributable to repeated measures.

In addition to the multivariable modelling approach, we also used cross tabulations and bivariable odds ratios to evaluate whether person-level factors significantly associated with the outcome of police encounters were associated with the circumstances of the event. Bivariable odds ratios were calculated using generalised estimate equations with the *geepack* package for two binary outcomes: (1) whether the participant reported engaging in an illegal activity prior to the encounter and (2) whether the participant reported that the police officer had suspected them of illegal activity as the rationale for their encounter.

Results

A total of 449 young people participated in the cross-sectional multi-community survey. Of these participants, 412 reported having at least one encounter with the police in the past five years. However, of these 412 participants with a history of a police encounters, only 360 participants answered questions about police encounters. These 360 participants provided information regarding 675 encounters with police (participants reported up to three events). Descriptive statistics for the analytic sample are provided in [Table 2](#). In brief, most included participants identified as heterosexual ($n = 286$; 79.4%), white ($n = 226$; 62.7%), and <20 years of age ($n = 155$; 43.1%) or between the ages of 21 and 25 ($n = 134$; 37.2%). The sample was evenly divided between those who identified as women ($n = 169$; 46.9%) and men (178; 49.4%), with thirteen (3.6%) identifying as gender non-binary. A total of 76 (21.1%) participants reported ever dealing drugs and 199 (55.3%) reported having more than four encounters with police in the past five years.

Table 2. Person-level Characteristics for Analytic Sample ($N = 360$ Participants).

	n (%)
Age	
16 - 20	155 (43.1)
21 - 25	134 (37.2)
26 - 30	67 (18.6)

	n (%)
City of Residence	
Victoria	116 (32.2)
Chilliwack	115 (31.9)
Prince George	129 (35.8)
Gender	
Female	169 (46.9)
Male	178 (49.4)
Non-binary	13 (3.6)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	286 (79.4)
Non-heterosexual	73 (20.3)
Income Level (Monthly)	
\$0 - \$663	154 (42.7)
\$664 - \$1200	88 (24.4)
\$1201 - \$2000	51 (14.2)
\$2001 or more	67 (18.6)
Ethnicity	
White	226 (62.7)
Indigenous	85 (23.6)
Other	49 (13.6)

	n (%)
History of Drug Dealing	
No	284 (78.8)
Yes	76 (21.1)
Number of Police Encounters in Past 5 Years	
1 to 3 Times	161 (44.7)
4 to 10 times	116 (32.2)
More than 10 times	83 (23.1)
Quality of Life Scores (<i>Median [Q1, Q3]</i>)	30 (25, 33)
Social Support Scores (<i>Median [Q1, Q3]</i>)	21 (19, 24)
Public Visibility Scores (<i>Median [Q1, Q3]</i>)	14 (11, 17)

*Observations with missing values included in proportion calculation.

Descriptive statistics for the encounter-level encounters between young people and police are provided in [Table 3](#). Within the context of these encounters, 117 (17.3%) occurred while the participant was biking or walking; 247 (36.6%) occurred while the participant was driving or riding as a passenger; 241 (35.7%) occurred while the participant was hanging out; and 69 (10.2%) occurred while the participant was engaged in an illegal activity. Most encounters occurred when a participant was with friends ($n = 368$; 54.5%) or alone ($n = 202$; 29.9%); and most encounters occurred at night or in the evening ($n = 402$; 59.6%). Additional variables can be found in [Table 3](#).

Table 3. Encounter-level Characteristics ($N = 675$ Encounters).

	n (%)
Encounter Outcome	
No action, Questioned, and/or Asked for Identification	227 (33.6)

	n (%)
Warned and/or Told to leave	132 (19.6)
Searched and/or Frisked	104 (15.4)
Ticket and/or Citation	101 (15.0)
Handcuffed or Arrested	111 (16.4)
Time of event	
Day time	269 (39.9)
Night time	402 (59.6)
Activity leading up to encounter	
Driving (as driver or passenger)	247 (36.6)
Biking or Walking	117 (17.3)
Hanging out (e.g., at school, at home, in public)	241 (35.7)
Doing something illegal (e.g., in a fight)	69 (10.2)
Reason Given By Police for Encounter	
Traffic-related Infraction (e.g., Jaywalking/DUI)	159 (23.6)
Random stop (e.g., roadblock)	131 (19.4)
Responding to a call (e.g., overdose, noise complaint)	183 (27.1)
Suspected Illegal Activity (e.g., trespassing, fighting)	102 (15.1)
Other	95 (14.1)
Encounter-level Use of Drugs	
No	350 (51.9)

	n (%)
Yes	319 (47.3)
Found in Possession of Drugs	
No	604 (89.5)
Yes	60 (8.9)
Participant was...	
Alone	202 (29.9)
With Friends	368 (54.5)
With Family members	74 (11.0)
With others (e.g., coworkers, professionals)	28 (4.2)

*Observations with missing values included in proportion calculation.

Regarding the outcomes of these encounters, 111 (16.4%) resulted in the participant being handcuffed or arrested; 104 (15.4%) resulted in being searched or frisked; 101 (15.0%) resulted in being ticketed or given a citation; 132 (19.6%) resulted in being warned or told to leave; and 227 (33.6%) resulted in no action, just being questioned, or being asked for identification.

Supplemental Table S1 shows bivariable associations between the outcome of the police encounter and each explanatory factor of interest and [Table 4](#) provides the multivariable-adjusted independent correlates of our outcome variable. The referent level for both bivariable models and our multivariable model was no action, being questioned, or being asked for identification (outcome level 1). In multivariable modelling, being warned and/or told to leave (outcome level 2) was associated with living in Victoria (vs. Prince George), higher quality of life scores, driving leading up to the encounter (vs. biking or walking), traffic-related citations (e.g., traffic/jaywalking/driving under the influence [DUI]), drugs or alcohol use at the time of the encounter, and being alone (vs. being with others). Being searched and/or frisked (outcome level 3) was associated with younger age, residence in Chilliwack (vs. Victoria), higher social support scores, illegal activity, random or non-explained police encounters, and drug possession. Being

ticketed or given a citation (outcome level 4) was associated with higher income (\$1201–2000 vs. \$0–663), encounters at night, hanging out (vs. driving), and traffic-related infraction (e.g. traffic/jaywalking/DUI). Finally, being handcuffed or arrested (outcome level 5) was associated with identifying as gender non-binary, Indigenous, a history of drug dealing, random police stops and “other” situations (e.g., problem with car) (vs. traffic-related infractions), as well as being in possession of drugs at time of the encounter.

Table 4. Multivariable Adjusted and Independent Associations with the Outcome of Young Adults’ Encounters with Police (N = 624 Encounters).

	Warned and/or told to leave	Searched and/or Frisked	Given a Ticket and/or Citation	Handcuffed and/or arrested
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
Person-Level Factors				
Age				
16 - 20	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
21 - 25	0.60 (0.31, 1.16)	0.33 (0.15, 0.73)	0.67 (0.32, 1.41)	0.82 (0.40, 1.66)
26 - 30	0.55 (0.25, 1.21)	0.44 (0.21, 0.93)	0.64 (0.23, 1.76)	0.43 (0.17, 1.06)
Gender				
Female	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Male	1.26 (0.69, 2.32)	1.18 (0.66, 2.11)	0.77 (0.36, 1.66)	0.65 (0.32, 1.32)
Non-binary	1.7 (0.29, 10.01)	2.82 (0.62, 12.89)	0.69 (0.14, 3.47)	8.40 (1.01, 69.72)
Ethnicity				

	Warned and/or told to leave	Searched and/or Frisked	Given a Ticket and/or Citation	Handcuffed and/or arrested
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
White	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Indigenous	1.57 (0.73, 3.38)	1.84 (0.86, 3.95)	0.90 (0.31, 2.65)	3.26 (1.43, 7.43)
Other	1.22 (0.59, 2.53)	1.55 (0.66, 3.64)	1.05 (0.42, 2.63)	1.22 (0.47, 3.14)
Income Level (Monthly)				
\$0 - \$663	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
\$664 - \$1200	1.35 (0.70, 2.58)	1.22 (0.58, 2.59)	2.02 (0.82, 4.96)	1.05 (0.51, 2.19)
\$1201 - \$2000	1.29 (0.51, 3.29)	1.54 (0.57, 4.20)	2.67 (1.01, 7.02)	0.96 (0.30, 3.07)
\$2001 or more	1.43 (0.64, 3.19)	1.23 (0.50, 3.07)	2.40 (0.92, 6.25)	1.19 (0.48, 2.94)
Sexual Orientation				
Heterosexual	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Non-heterosexual	1.19 (0.59, 2.40)	1.39 (0.61, 3.17)	1.32 (0.46, 3.77)	0.58 (0.25, 1.35)
City of Residence				
Victoria	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Chilliwack	0.66 (0.35, 1.27)	2.36 (1.12, 4.96)	0.50 (0.22, 1.14)	0.65 (0.26, 1.61)

	Warned and/or told to leave	Searched and/or Frisked	Given a Ticket and/or Citation	Handcuffed and/or arrested
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
Prince George	0.37 (0.18, 0.77)	1.47 (0.62, 3.48)	0.74 (0.29, 1.92)	1.15 (0.46, 2.88)
Quality of Life Scores	1.06 (1.00, 1.12)	0.94 (0.89, 1.00)	1.04 (0.97, 1.11)	1.00 (0.93, 1.08)
Social Support Scores	0.97 (0.90, 1.04)	1.12 (1.04, 1.21)	0.98 (0.88, 1.09)	0.95 (0.86, 1.05)
Public Visibility Scores	1.02 (0.95, 1.09)	1.01 (0.93, 1.08)	0.99 (0.91, 1.09)	1.03 (0.95, 1.11)
History of Drug Dealing				
No	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Yes	1.44 (0.75, 2.79)	1.6 (0.76, 3.40)	0.99 (0.34, 2.94)	2.37 (1.15, 4.89)
Number of Police Encounters in Past 5 Years				
1 to 3 Times	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
4 to 10 times	1.19 (0.67, 2.12)	0.83 (0.43, 1.63)	0.64 (0.32, 1.25)	1.44 (0.67, 3.10)
More than 10 times	1.08 (0.49, 2.41)	0.73 (0.32, 1.69)	0.69 (0.24, 1.98)	1.89 (0.76, 4.69)
Encounter-Level Factors				
Time of event				

	Warned and/or told to leave	Searched and/or Frisked	Given a Ticket and/or Citation	Handcuffed and/or arrested
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
Day time	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Night time	0.68 (0.38, 1.21)	1.29 (0.7, 2.37)	0.45 (0.23, 0.89)	0.71 (0.39, 1.27)
Activity leading up to encounter				
Driving (as driver or passenger)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Biking or Walking	0.32 (0.11, 0.94)	2.41 (0.95, 6.11)	0.48 (0.16, 1.42)	0.85 (0.31, 2.33)
Doing something illegal (e.g., in a fight)	2.1 (0.66, 6.72)	3.49 (1.11, 10.94)	0.85 (0.17, 4.17)	1.47 (0.43, 4.96)
Hanging out (e.g., at school, at home, in public)	1.13 (0.48, 2.66)	1.49 (0.60, 3.74)	0.18 (0.06, 0.62)	0.96 (0.38, 2.43)
Reason Given By Police for Encounter				
Traffic-related Infraction (e.g., Jaywalking/DUI)	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Random stop (e.g., roadblock)	0.13 (0.05, 0.33)	0.69 (0.25, 1.85)	0.03 (0.01, 0.08)	0.27 (0.10, 0.78)
Responding to a call (e.g., overdose, noise complaint)	0.21 (0.07, 0.64)	0.89 (0.30, 2.67)	0.02 (0.01, 0.13)	0.91 (0.31, 2.64)
Suspected Illegal Activity (e.g., trespassing, fighting)	0.24 (0.07, 0.77)	1.24 (0.37, 4.11)	0.12 (0.03, 0.49)	0.57 (0.17, 1.87)

	Warned and/or told to leave	Searched and/or Frisked	Given a Ticket and/or Citation	Handcuffed and/or arrested
	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)	aOR (95% CI)
Other	0.13 (0.05, 0.39)	0.74 (0.25, 2.20)	0.10 (0.03, 0.26)	0.32 (0.12, 0.90)
Encounter-level Use of Drugs				
No	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Yes	2.08 (1.16, 3.72)	1.69 (0.88, 3.23)	1.56 (0.63, 3.87)	1.34 (0.69, 2.59)
Found in Possession of Drugs				
No	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Yes	1.99 (0.49, 8.04)	5.77 (1.53, 21.84)	3.58 (0.48, 26.61)	14.59 (4.18, 50.87)
Participant was...				
Alone	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
With Friends	1.83 (0.94, 3.56)	1.78 (0.88, 3.59)	0.76 (0.36, 1.61)	1.15 (0.55, 2.41)
With Family members	0.51 (0.19, 1.35)	0.57 (0.17, 1.94)	0.69 (0.22, 2.14)	0.71 (0.23, 2.14)
With others (e.g., coworkers, professionals)	0.09 (0.01, 0.96)	0.53 (0.11, 2.60)	0.24 (0.02, 3.58)	0.08 (0.01, 1.08)

Reference Level = Nothing happened, questioned, and/or asked for identification;
aOR = Adjusted Odds Ratio; 95% CI = 95% Confidence Interval.

Supplementary results in **Supplemental Table S2** show sub-analyses examining whether (i) non-binary, (ii) Indigenous, and (iii) younger individuals were more likely to report that (a) the police officer said they stopped them because they were suspected of illegal activity and (b) they were doing something illegal at the time of the police encounter. These results showed that younger age, non-binary gender, and Indigenous ethnicity were independent of participation in illegal activity and of being suspected of a crime at the time of the encounter.

Discussion

To our knowledge, this is the first study which examines contextual, individual, personal, and social factors implicated in encounters between police amongst young people—particularly with its novel focus on younger Canadians living in smaller, non-metropolitan communities. Our study found that key person- and context-specific factors were associated with the reported outcomes of these encounters. Notably, we found that gender non-binary and Indigenous participants were more likely to experience punitive measures (i.e., being handcuffed or arrested), even after adjusting for histories of drug dealing, past police encounters, and contextual factors. Younger participants were also more likely to be searched or frisked by police regardless of illegal activity or being suspected of a crime at the time of the encounter. These findings indicate that outcomes of encounters between young people and police may be discriminatory – predicated on individual's visible characteristics, such as race, gender, and age.

These findings support and extend other findings indicating that police may interact more frequently with marginalised individuals by demonstrating that the outcomes of these encounters are more severe for people identified as minorities (e.g., identified as Indigenous people or gender non-binary), irrespective of situational factors and criminal histories. For a variety of reasons, research primarily emphasises profiling based on ethnicity and Indigeneity (Hayle, Wortley, & Tanner, 2016; Wortley & Tanner, 2004, 2006), but also includes markers that may indicate other identity-related characteristics, such as a person's religion (Roux, 2018), lower socioeconomic status (Robinson, 2019), or non-heterosexual sexual orientation (Mallory, Hasenbush, & Sears, 2015). However, visible differences alone are not a sufficient explanation for these findings. Indeed, stigma combined with histories of social oppression (e.g., colonialism, patriarchy) have long been institutionalized and enforced (Benoit, Jansson, Smith, & Flagg, 2018). Thus, we would interpret the combination of visibility and social history as the drivers behind these findings.

In combination with our findings, evidence of discriminatory policing amongst young people in BC is particularly concerning as these encounters may significantly impact the wellbeing of an already marginalised population, young people who are rendered vulnerable through systemic oppression, stigmatisation, discrimination, and colonisation, in the face of police who wield a significant amount of power ([Boyce, Rotenberg, & Karam, 2015](#); [Pan et al., 2013](#)). These findings also underscore human rights concerns posed by others regarding such encounters ([Carrington & Schulenberg, 2003](#)).

Relatedly, our finding that young people using drugs or alcohol were more likely to be warned or told to leave suggests that police sometimes exercise discretion when interacting with young people, opting for informal police action over punitive measures. While such discretion over the control of public spaces is not without harm ([Sylvestre, 2010](#)), restraint in invoking the criminal process is commendable. Yet, our finding that young people with a history of drug dealing are more likely to be handcuffed or arrested suggests that police might be relying on young people's past histories to make decisions during these encounters. Taken together, these findings speak to the so called 'low visibility decisions' in the administration of justice within police encounters ([Goldstein, 1959](#)). Given the street-level bureaucratic power maintained by police, our findings support the need for improved training on when police officers should employ discretion and also highlight the need to actively ensure that such discretions are meted out irrespective of race, gender or age. Further research is also needed to understand how these discriminatory decisions might impact health and wellness of youth overtime as they move towards adulthood.

Finally, our findings indicate that contextual factors were associated with encounter outcomes. For example, encounters occurring at night were less likely to result in police action, particularly with regards to issuance of tickets and citations. Noting that nearly two-thirds of encounters occur at night, our results call into question the nature of these encounters and whether police encounters with young people occur simply as a preventative measure or if they are actually intended to avert crime or harm ([White, 1993](#)). If the former, we should note that previous studies have found that youth who feel targeted by police are less likely to access police for protection or when there is an imminent need ([Norman, 2009](#)). Discouraging non-essential encounters might, therefore, improve the efficiency and efficacy of policing activities.

Similar to our finding regarding police activities at night, our results provide some descriptive insight into the nature of the encounters reported by our participants. For instance, those engaged in illegal activity were more likely to be searched, and those found in possession of drugs were more likely to be searched/frisked and more likely to be handcuffed or arrested. These findings

were somewhat expected given the criminalisation of personal drug use and possession in Canada. While this is not to say that young people are not exposed to unjust punitive outcomes (other studies have shown that racial minorities are more likely to be searched ([Tillyer & Klahm, 2011](#))), it does suggest that, in general, police are responding to illegal activities by invoking more severe measures. Likewise, our finding that youth driving versus hanging out were more likely to be cited was unsurprising given the role police have in enforcing traffic safety and motor vehicle laws. These findings speak to the role police have been assigned in enforcing the criminal code and public safety.

The present study is not without limitations. First, we recognise that the encounters between young people and police are incredibly diverse and that this diversity may not be captured within the current findings. While we did our best to classify encounters using succinct and well-reasoned quantitative categories, it was clear that improvements to survey methodologies on police encounters could be made. This limitation is particularly true for variables describing what participants were doing leading up to the encounter, reasons given by police for each encounter, and the setting in which arrests occurred as bias may be present. Nevertheless, this retrospective, encounter-level data provides a unique contribution to the study of police encounters with young people that may enrich and catalyse future studies – particularly those which adopt qualitative methods to capture the nature of young peoples’ encounters with police, and how various situational, personal, and social factors are experienced by youth people in diverse and complex ways. As well, despite our attempt to recruit a diverse sample of young people using multiple methods of participant engagement, our study does not come from a random sample and therefore may not be generalizable to all young people who use drugs—especially those who might not have been willing to talk with interviewers or were not available at the locations where interviews were advertised. Similarly, we note that some small cell counts (e.g., only 13 participants reported non-binary gender) – arising from both our sampling procedure and our use of a multi-level outcome – may limit the generalizability of our findings and introduce risk for error. While we rely on p-values to inform us as to whether the differences between these groups may be observed by chance alone, we do recognize that our study may be underpowered. A larger scale study is thus needed to better understand the relationships modelled here.

Furthermore, a larger sample size would also address potential issues with model fit that may arise from including the relatively large number of variables required to isolate the effects being studied in this analysis. In addition to random error, our subject is also vulnerable to bias. Indeed, because our study was conducted amongst young people who use drugs and aimed to understand

encounters with police, it is likely that our study was subject to response biases in that some young people who would be afraid to talk about their experiences with police may not be represented in our sample. In addition, participants were only required to reside in their city for the past six months while the events reported may have taken place anywhere. Therefore, the inclusion of city in our multivariable model should not be interpreted with great weight. Finally, we recognize that the validity of this study relies, at least in part, on the validity of self-reported data. As noted by Knights, Little, Losoya and Mulvey (2004), self-reported data regarding experiences with police are generally believed to be valid and reliable, but some between-group differences may exist. This is important to consider given that our study sought to specifically understand how between-group demographic traits might relate to outcomes of encounters with police (Knights et al., 2004). Further investigation into these differential effects is warranted, but it is worth noting that our findings are generally consistent with well-established narratives that young people themselves provide regarding policing practices (Wästerfors & Alm, 2020). Furthermore, other studies generally suggest that self-reported prevalence, frequency, and timing of arrest is valuable – particularly in interview administered questionnaires such as that utilized in the present study (Morris & Slocum, 2010).

Despite these limitations, our results, in tandem with the larger body of evidence on this topic, reflect the unfortunate reality in which those with the least trust and confidence in police are those who have experienced the worst outcomes from interacting with police. Given that negative perceptions of police have been linked with reduced likelihood of reporting crimes (Wiedlitzka, Mazerolle, Fay-Ramirez, & Miles-Johnson, 2018), reduced willingness amongst victims to cooperate with police (Koster, 2017), and increased citizen support for vigilantism (Haas, Keijser, & Bruinsma, 2014), our findings suggest that the overall effectiveness of policing initiatives may be degraded through policing activities themselves which are discriminatory, especially when, as reported in our study here, policing activities appear to have a disproportionate burden on already marginalised individuals and communities (Doob & Gartner, 2017; Weaver, 2018). As such, promoting citizens' respectability towards law enforcement may require an immediate improvement to policing activities which address the inequities in policing outcomes in order to address the disparate discrimination and negative outcomes marginalised individuals and communities experience (Bazemore & Schiff, 2001; Cunneen, 2001; Dwyer, 2014).

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Author note

SM, KU, NJL, CB, and BP participated in conceptualization and methodological design of the Youth Experiences Project, funding acquisition, and secured project resources. MS and AMG coordinated and provided insight on instrument design, protocol development, participant recruitment and they conducted interviews with youth. KGC led the initial analytic design for this aim of the study, with input from MS, AMG, and SM. KGC and KJH completed the formal analysis. KGC led the writing (original draft) of the manuscript, assisted by ABF and AMG. All authors provided writing review and editing for the final submitted version of the manuscript, including substantial revisions that led to significant revisions to the analytic approach.”

Declarations of Interests

None.

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