

EPC 2026

Defunding the Police to Improve Minority School Performance? Quasi-Experimental Evidence from California

Short abstract (250 words)

Are policies to ‘defund the police’ effective? The slogan became famous after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests demanded policies to reallocate funds, across U.S. cities, from law enforcement departments to social services and resources for communities. After months of pressure, in 2021 the Los Angeles Unified School District cut 33% of its police force to re-invest in Black students’ achievement, becoming one of the very few urban areas to enact such a policy. Los Angeles also dedicates about 23% of its budget to policing, has oftentimes been under the spotlight due to the department’s treatment of racial minorities, and has higher dropout rates compared to the rest of the country. Hence, we plan to use administrative records of police stops from California’s main cities, as well as school-level and student-level data, from 2018 to 2025, to explore whether the program managed to deliver on its promises: reduce racial disparities in policing and improve minorities’ (particularly Black students) test scores and dropout rates. To answer our research question, we plan to use a difference-in-differences for our identification strategy, to properly isolate the causal effect of the policy and find out whether it successfully curbed racial disparities in policing, test scores, and graduation rates, when we compare Los Angeles to other similar jurisdictions in the State.

Extended abstract (2-4 pages)

1. Introduction and theory

Police discrimination against racial minorities is a long-standing issue in the United States, where law enforcement disproportionately stops (Gelman et al. 2007; Pierson et al. 2020), searches (Simoiu et al. 2017), arrests (Baumgartner et al. 2017), and uses force (Knox et al. 2020) against Black and Latino people daily.

Biased policing has been under growing scrutiny in the last years, particularly due to the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the mid 2010s. This has elicited continuous calls to reform the police, that became ever so stronger after the summer of 2020, when after police agent Derek Chauvin killed a Black man – George Floyd – in Minneapolis, demonstrations erupted to

demand radical changes in U.S. policing. Among these, a new call for police reform was substantiated in the demand to ‘defund the police’.

To ‘defund the police’ means, for its supporters, to aim at reconfiguring the power, function, and reach of law enforcement in the United States. These calls start from an understanding of policing as an institution that has contributed to enforce and maintain a fundamentally unequal status quo, through the over-policing – and consequent funneling into incarceration – of racially minoritized community (Cobbina-Dungy and Jones-Brown 2023). Recognizing the role that law enforcement has in upholding structural racism in the U.S., calls to defund it aim at going beyond small-scale reforms that target individual agents’ behavior, accountability, or incentives, and rather focus on addressing the power and scope that policing has in the country. Concretely, this means to divest from law enforcement – especially in those cities where significant portions of the budget are destined for policing – and redirecting funds for policies such as social services, community well-being, and improving welfare protections (Eaglin 2021).

Despite the movement’s pressure, defunding the police remained a marginal demand and virtually no city implemented reforms to defund its police departments. An exception to this has been Los Angeles where, in 2021, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) approved a policy to cut 33% (i.e., 133 positions) of its police force (the Los Angeles School Police Department), to re-invest 25 million \$ in Black student achievement (Gomez 2021). Considering this policy, that was passed as a result of explicit demands to defund the police, what we ask in this paper is: can these policies be effective to reduce minority youth policing and their school dropout rates, and improve their school performance?

The case study chosen is also important as the connection between racially biased policing and schooling is, in the U.S., particularly relevant. Exposure to law enforcement has been linked to poorer test scores performances among Black students (Legewie and Fagan 2019), as well as to avoidance of schools and other ‘surveilling’ institutions (Brayne 2014). More generally, the criminalization and over-policing of minority youth in U.S. schools has been described as a phenomenon creating a ‘school-to-prison’ pipeline, where Black and Latino students are funneled into the criminal justice system due to sustained police presence in schools (Petrosino et al. 2024), consequently leading to their early labelling as criminals (Rios 2006) as discipline and punishment through suspension, expulsion and school-based arrest became the dominant paradigm to deal with minority youth in the school context (American Civil Liberties Union 2008).

This connection between policing and the school performance of minorities is hence the object of analysis in this paper. In this regard, the policy passed by the LAUSD in 2021 can allow us to causally explore how minority policing shapes their school performance.

2. Data and methods

To answer our research questions, we aim to use publicly available records of police stops for the main cities in California – Los Angeles, San Diego, San Jose, San Francisco, Fresno, Sacramento, Long Beach, Oakland – that were collected under the Racial and Identity Profiling Act (RIPA) of 2018. For schooling data, we aim to use time-series cross-sectional data collected at the school level in the State of California (Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate and Outcome Data) and student-level longitudinal data (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System). The period of observation will cover years from 2018 to 2025.

The main identification strategy to answer our research questions will be centered around using a difference-in-differences (DiD) design. Here, we will compare changes between our treated unit (Los Angeles, where the policy was passed in 2021) and our control units (other Californian cities which did not pass policies to defund the police). This will allow us to isolate policy effects from other possible variations in policing or schooling.

The dependent variables under consideration in this study will be three: 1) the share of Black stops in the student-age population of each city; 2) the dropout rate of Black student by city; 3) the average standardized test scores of Black students by city. The analysis will also be run taking into consideration Hispanic/Latino students, to check whether the policy had an effect on them too.

Robustness checks will include: checking for whether the parallel trend assumption holds true; including time & unit fixed effects to check for time and place invariant confounders; clustering standard errors at the treatment assignment level (city); checking for heterogeneous effects (e.g., whether the treatment had different effects on poorer/more segregated neighborhoods/schools).

Regarding the findings, we expect to see a quick drop in police stops against minority youth in the first year after the passing of the policy. However, we expect that drops in minority school dropout and improvement in their school achievement might be delayed and growing as the years go by, as we expect the effect to grow stronger for subsequent cohorts that get progressively less exposed to policing during the years.

3. Bibliography

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