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Larger Police Forces Linked to Economic Mobility Gap for Black Males

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The percentage of American children growing up to earn more than their parents has decreased from 90% in 1945 to 50% today. And even among the more successful of recent generations, such upward economic mobility varies across cities and demographic groups.

Harvard-based nonprofit group [Opportunity Insights \(https://opportunityinsights.org/\)](https://opportunityinsights.org/) recently published data linking parent and child tax records, finding a significant gap in economic mobility attained by Black males compared with white males. However, data for females showed no racial mobility gap. And the racial mobility gap between Black and white males varied from city to city.

What could explain these findings? After all, Black males and females predominantly go to the same schools, live in the same areas, and can share the same homes. What about their lived experiences could explain this different outcome?

Institution for Social and Policy Studies faculty fellow [Rourke O'Brien](https://isps.yale.edu/team/rouke-obrien) (<https://isps.yale.edu/team/rouke-obrien>), an associate professor of sociology, and [Manuel Schechtl](https://publicpolicy.unc.edu/person/schechtl-manuel/) (<https://publicpolicy.unc.edu/person/schechtl-manuel/>), assistant professor of public policy at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, constructed a study to test one possibility.

“This is one of these curious findings,” O'Brien said. “We had to think of a social factor that varied across places and differently impacted people based on both race and gender. We know that structural racism would drive outcomes between Black people and white people and that gender disparities would lead to differences between men and women. But what might disparately impact only Black males?”

[In a paper published this month](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0276562424000945?via%3Dihub#bib10) (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0276562424000945?via%3Dihub#bib10>), O'Brien and Schechtl analyzed data in 200 major cities from the 1990s, when the subjects from the Opportunity Insights data were teenagers and young adults. They found that the racial mobility gap increased in relation to the per capita size of a city's police force — for males but not females. In addition, they found that the increased exposure to police personnel during the teenage and young adult years of people studied led to a higher likelihood of incarceration for Black males compared with white males.

“For other groups — Black females, white males, and white females — there were better outcomes,” Schechtl said. “For them, more policing might have primarily meant less crime. But our findings are consistent with a large body of research showing that where there is more intensive policing, Black males are more likely to make contact with the criminal justice system, negatively impacting their levels of educational attainment and ability to secure a good job.”

The researchers' analysis accounted for other potential influences on the mobility gap affecting Black males, such as the decline in manufacturing jobs, which have a higher percentage of male workers. They also accounted for crime levels and racial gaps in crime perpetration and victimization, which may be correlated with police staffing levels.

“There could always be other factors, and we can't rule them out,” O'Brien said. “But this story fits the patterns we and many others observe, so we feel confident in our findings, which are consistent with the extensive literature across social sciences.”

And while their findings focus on the negative effects of increased policing on Black males, O'Brien emphasized how other people are also affected.

“When we focus on the disparate outcomes for Black males, we need to remember they are embedded in families and communities,” he said. “Policies that make it difficult for Black men to get ahead have spillover consequences for their partners, children and neighbors.”

Studying economic mobility over time requires observing people into adulthood, preventing researchers from applying the findings to current conditions and future outcomes. However, O’Brien said, many of these disparities persist, and evidence continues to show that Black males have

disproportionate negative outcomes involving the criminal justice system that would likely have negative consequences for their education, careers, and — by extension — economic mobility.

“We have to be mindful that investing resources in the criminal justice system can have upsides for society,” O’Brien said. “But some groups, particularly young Black males, can be extremely negatively and disparately affected. We need to think of interventions to protect and safeguard those groups to make sure they are enjoying the same benefits while mitigating these downstream effects on their ability to achieve the American dream.”



Rourke O'Brien

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