

## Cal-VEX 2020: Police Violence and Mental Health in California

### BACKGROUND

June 2020 has seen the largest national civil rights protests in the United States in generations,<sup>1</sup> sparked by the latest police killing of an unarmed Black man, George Floyd, and with the goal of ending the acceptability of systemic racism in institutions like police forces. Some of the largest protests have been seen in California,<sup>2</sup> and have resulted in policy change, such as cuts to the Los Angeles police department and redistribution of these funds to health, education, and employment opportunities for the city's Black communities.<sup>3</sup> These communities are likely in need of support for the trauma and mental health impacts of these issues; prior research documents higher prevalence of depression and anxiety among those exposed to police violence<sup>4</sup> and systemic racism more broadly.<sup>5</sup> Certainly, elimination of these policing abuses is the most important step to mitigate these negative mental health outcomes, but alongside that effort, there is potential value in ensuring provision of social supports for those who have already experienced this form of violence.

**Objective.** To assess the prevalence of policing violence exposure in California and its association with depression and anxiety, and to determine if social support affects the association between policing violence and poor mental health.

### METHODS

The California Study on Violence Experiences Across the Lifespan (Cal-VEX) is a state-representative survey on experiences of violence from different perpetrators across the lifespan, conducted with 2115 California residents aged 18 and older.<sup>6</sup> In this research brief, we focus on police violence and mental health.

**Measures.** We asked participants if they had ever experienced direct violence or threat with a gun from a police officer, dichotomized as yes or no to ever experiencing police violence. We assessed mental health via four items on depression and anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks,<sup>7</sup> dichotomized as yes or no to depression and/or anxiety. We also asked about frequency of receiving social and emotional support when needed, via a single item ranging from never to always.<sup>8</sup>

**Analysis.** We present prevalence of police violence, for the total sample and by demographics. We also present multivariate logistic regression on associations between police violence and mental health, controlling for demographics, then demographics and social support. Analyses were weighted to produce results representative of California adults.

### FINDINGS

#### Prevalence of Police Violence

- 2.3% of our sample have been victims of police violence (Figure 1). Assuming a current population of 24.6 million adults<sup>9</sup>, this indicates more than 565,000 California adults have been victims of police violence.

#### Prevalence by Sex

- Men were significantly more likely than women to report police violence ever (Figure 1). 4.4% of all men have experienced police violence, compared to less than 1.0% of women ( $p < 0.05$ ).

#### Prevalence by Race

- Black adults are at greatest risk for police violence ( $p < 0.05$ ). Where 2.2% of White and 1.7% of Hispanic adults have experienced police violence, 9.7% of Black adults have experienced this violence.

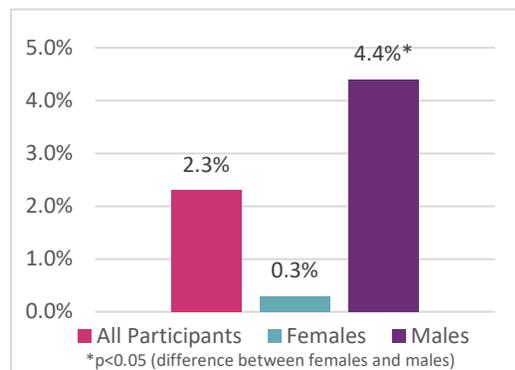
#### Prevalence by Income

- Middle-income individuals are at highest risk for police violence ( $p < 0.05$ ). Police violence was 2.8% for lowest-income, 0.9% for lower-income, 4.9% for middle-income, 1.2% for higher-income, and 1.0% for highest-income participants.

#### Association between Police Violence and Mental Health

- Almost half of participants (46.6%) reported depression and/or anxiety symptoms in the past two weeks. This is likely related to timing of data collection, March 2020, or the start of the COVID-19 related California government shutdown.
- Using multivariate logistic regression models including demographics (gender, race, and income), we found that those

**Figure 1.** Prevalence of Police Violence in California, Total Sample and by Sex



with a history of police violence had 2.6 times the odds (95% CI: 1.06, 6.18;  $p=0.04$ ) of experiencing depression and/or anxiety in the past two weeks, compared to those with no such history.

- Using multivariate logistic regression models including demographics (gender, race, and income) as well as social support, we found a reduction in this association (AOR: 2.2; 95% CI: 0.85, 5.48;  $p=0.11$ ). This suggests that social support may reduce the impact of police violence exposure on poorer mental health outcomes.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Police violence has occurred for 2.3% of California adults, which means that over 565,000 adults in the state have experienced violence or threats of violence from police, with prevalence highest for men and Black individuals.
- Our findings also indicate that, by income, increased likelihood of policing violence was greatest for middle-income individuals. This may be due to middle-income minorities being more likely than lower-income minorities to be in White neighborhoods, which is linked with higher policing exposure.<sup>10,11</sup> Other research indicates that lowest income individuals might be most vulnerable to police violence<sup>12</sup> and our study respondents did not include incarcerated individuals or those without access to the internet. Additional research is needed to examine the complex interplay between income and race as related to police violence.
- As anticipated, police violence is associated with greater odds of depression and anxiety, and that social support may help mitigate these effects.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND ACTION

Police violence is an epidemic in the state of California that disproportionately burdens men and Black communities. Efforts to end this disproportionate and abusive form of policing must be a priority for the state. In this time of political change and social reckoning, efforts are needed to identify ways to support community needs for public safety beyond policing. For example, in situations that are not dangerous, medical and social services workers may be better than police to interface with community members. Findings here suggest that social support programs may be beneficial for individuals traumatized by police violence. Next steps must include how to build such supports at scale.

Middle-income individuals also appear to be at increased risk for police violence, possibly due to greater profiling in these areas. It may be that these individuals are more likely to be in neighborhoods or settings where they are the minority, a factor related to police targeting and even fatal police violence in other research.<sup>10,11,13</sup> If this is the case, this speaks not only to policing practices but also to residential segregation in affecting risks.

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