



[Tiny wrists in cuffs: How police use force against children](#)

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today

CHICAGO (AP) — Royal Smart remembers every detail: the feeling of the handcuffs on his wrists. The panic as he was led outside into the cold March darkness, arms raised, to face a wall of police officers pointing their guns.

He was 8 years old.

Neither he nor anyone else at his family's home on Chicago's South Side was arrested on that night two years ago, and police wielding a warrant to look for illegal weapons found none. But even now, in nightmares and in waking moments, he is tormented by visions of officers bursting through houses and tearing rooms apart, ordering people to lie down on the floor.

"I can't go to sleep," he said. "I keep thinking about the police coming."

Children like Royal were not the focus after [George Floyd died at the hands of police](#) in 2020, prompting a raging debate on the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement, especially on adults of color. Kids are still an afterthought in reforms

championed by lawmakers and pushed by police departments. But in case after case, an Associated Press investigation has found that children as young as 6 have been treated harshly — even brutally — by officers of the law.

They have been handcuffed, felled by stun guns, taken down and pinned to the ground by officers often far larger than they were. Departments nationwide have few or no guardrails to prevent such incidents.

The AP analyzed data on approximately 3,000 instances of police use of force against children under 16 over the past 11 years. The data, provided to the AP by Accountable Now, a project of The Leadership Conference Education Fund aiming to create a comprehensive use-of-force database, includes incidents from 25 police departments in 17 states.

It's a small representation of the 18,000 overall police agencies nationwide and the millions of daily encounters police have with the public.

But the information gleaned is troubling.

Black children made up more than 50% of those who were handled forcibly, though they are only 15% of the U.S. child population. They and other minority kids are often perceived by police as being older than they are. The most common types of force were takedowns, strikes and muscling, followed by firearms pointed at or used on children. Less often, children faced other tactics, like the use of pepper spray or police K-9s.

In Minneapolis, officers pinned children with their bodyweight at least 190 times. In Indianapolis, more than 160 kids were handcuffed; in Wichita, Kansas, police officers drew or used their Tasers on kids at least 45 times. Most children in the dataset are teenagers, but the data included dozens of cases of children ages 10 or younger who were also subject to police force.

Force is occasionally necessary to subdue children, some of whom are accused of serious crimes.

Police reports obtained for a sample of incidents show that some kids who were stunned or restrained were armed; others were undergoing mental health crises and were at risk of harming themselves. Still other reports showed police force escalating after kids fled from police questioning. In St. Petersburg, Florida, for instance, officers chased a Black boy on suspicion of attempted car theft after he pulled the handle of a car door. He was 13 years old and 80 pounds (36 kilograms), and his flight ended with his thigh caught in a police K-9's jaw.

The AP contacted every police department detailed in this story. Some did not respond; others said they could not comment because of pending litigation. Those responding defended the conduct of their officers or noted changes to the departments after the incidents took place.

There are no laws that specifically prohibit police force against children. Some departments have policies that govern how old a child must be to be handcuffed, but very few mention age in their use-of-force policies. While some offer guidance on how to manage juveniles accused of crime or how to handle people in mental distress, the AP could find no policy that addresses these issues together.

That's by design, policing experts said, in part so that officers can make critical decisions in the moment. But that means police don't receive the training they need to deal with kids.

"Adolescents are just so fundamentally different in so many respects, and the techniques that officers are accustomed to using ... it just doesn't lend itself to the interaction going well with youth," said Dylan Jackson, a criminologist at Johns Hopkins University, who is working with the Baltimore Police Department on juvenile encounters.

The trauma lasts. Kids can't sleep. They withdraw, act out. Their brains are still developing, and the encounters can have long-term impact, psychologists said.

"I think that when officers understand the basic core components of development and youth development — their social, emotional, physical, psychological development — it can really help them understand why they might need to take a different approach," Jackson said.

Training offered by the National Association of School Resource Officers includes sessions on the adolescent brain to help officers understand why kids react and respond the way they do, executive director Mo Canady said. But not every department makes use of the training.

Canady and other policing experts cautioned against blanket policies that would bar force against younger children.

"You can't say just because a student is 12 that we're not going to use force," Canady said. "Most 12-year-olds you wouldn't. But you don't know the circumstances of everything. You could have a 12-year-old who is bigger, stronger and assaulting a teacher, and you may very well have to use some level of force."

Royal, the boy in Chicago, was handcuffed for nearly 30 minutes in the cold, alongside his mother and other adults in the house. Then a police sergeant released him, and an aunt came to look after the children.

Royal's brother Roy, older by one year, stood by watching, not knowing what to say or do. According to a lawsuit filed by the family, police didn't handcuff him because "officers simply ran out of handcuffs." Roy thought his brother was cuffed first because he looked "intimidating": He was wearing a blue hoodie.

That spring, in another pocket of the South Side, Krystal Archie's three children were there when police — on two occasions just 11 weeks apart — kicked open her front door and tore apart the cabinets and dressers searching for drug suspects. She'd never heard of the people they were hunting.

Her oldest child, Savannah, was 14, Telia was 11 and her youngest, Jhaimarion, was 7. They were ordered to get down on the floor. Telia said the scariest moment was seeing an officer press his foot into Savannah's back.

Archie said her children “were told, demanded, to get down on the ground as if they were criminals.”

“They were questioned as if they were adults,” she said.

Now Savannah's hands shake when she sees a police car coming. “I get stuck. I get scared,” she said.

Both families have sued Chicago police, alleging false arrest, wanton conduct and emotional distress. Chicago police did not comment on their specific cases but said revised policies passed in May require extra planning for vulnerable people like children before search warrants are served.

But the attorney for the two families, Al Hofeld Jr., said the incidents are part of a pattern and represent a specific brand of force that falls disproportionately on poor families of color.

“The number of cases that we have is just the tip of the iceberg,” he said.

About 165 miles (265 kilometers) due south, in the rural hamlet of Paris, Illinois, 15-year-old Skyler Davis was riding his bike near his house when he ran afoul of a local ordinance that prohibited biking and skateboarding in the business district — a law that was rarely enforced, if ever.

But on that day, according to Skyler's father, Aaron Davis, police officers followed his mentally disabled son in their squad car and chased his bike up over a curb and across the grass.

Officers pursued Skyler into his house and threw him to the floor, handcuffing him and slamming him against a wall, his father said. Davis arrived to see police pulling Skyler — 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall and barely 80 pounds (36 kilograms), with a “pure look of terror” on his face — toward the squad car.

“He's just a happy kid, riding his bike down the road,” Davis said, “And 30 to 45 seconds later, you see him basically pedaling for his life.”

Video of the pursuit was captured by surveillance cameras outside the police department, and the family has filed a federal lawsuit against the police officers. Two

officers received written warnings, according to attorney Jude Redwood. The Paris Police Department declined to comment.

“What they done to him was brutal,” Davis said.

Kristin Henning, director of the Juvenile Justice Clinic at Georgetown University’s law school, has represented children accused of delinquency for more than 20 years and said many encounters escalate “from zero to 100” in seconds — often because police interpret impulsive adolescent behavior as a threat.

“When you are close to the kids, you work with the kids every day, you see that they are just kids, and they’re doing what every other kid does,” she said. “Talking back, being themselves, experimenting, expressing their discomfort, expressing their displeasure about something — that’s what kids do.”

Meanwhile, attorneys like Na’Shaun Neal say police who use force on minors often depend on the perception that kids lie. Against an officer’s word, Neal said, “no one typically believes the children.”

Neal represents two boys — identified as R.R. and P.S. in court papers — who were involved in an altercation with police on July 4, 2019.

It was a few hours before midnight when a San Fernando, California, police officer stopped to ask if they were lighting fireworks, according to a complaint filed in federal court. The boys had been walking through a park, accompanied by an older brother and his dog.

According to the complaint, the officers followed the group and told them it was past curfew; they needed to take the boys into custody.

Police said the boys were responsible for the fracas that followed, and they charged them with assaulting an officer and resisting arrest.

But then a cellphone video, taken by R.R.’s brother Jonathan Valdivia, materialized. And as was the case in the death of Floyd — who was blamed for his own death until [a video showed](#) Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin pinning him to the ground with his knee to Floyd’s neck as Floyd cried out for help — Valdivia’s video told a very different story.

The video shows an officer forcing his 14-year-old brother to the ground and handcuffing him behind his back. His 13-year-old friend struggles next to him, his neck and shoulders pinned by the officer’s knees for 20 seconds.

“Get off of my neck! That’s too hard!” the 13-year-old screams.

A judge found the boys not guilty at a bench trial. Neal is suing the city and the police officer on their behalf.

The city of San Fernando has denied that officers used excessive force, maintaining that the boys physically resisted arrest.

“They were very confrontational and aggressive verbally,” the city’s attorney Dan Alderman said. “Unfortunately, the escalation occurred because of the conduct of the minors, not because of anything the officer did.”

It is worth noting that R.R. and P.S. are Latinos. Authorities say there are reasons why police officers are more likely to use force against minorities than against white children.

A 2014 study published by the American Psychological Association found that Black boys as young as 10 may not be viewed with the same “childhood innocence” as their white peers and are more likely to be perceived as guilty and face police violence. Other studies have found a similar bias against Black girls.

Tamika Harrell’s 13-year-old daughter went to a skating rink with a friend in their mostly white town outside Akron, Ohio, last summer; she was one of only a few Black teens at the crowded, mostly white rink. After a fight broke out, the girl — who was in the bathroom when the brawl began — was grabbed by an officer, roughly handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police car.

Harrell wondered why her kid — the Black kid — was singled out. Before, they had a good relationship with the police. But that’s all changed. The incident is still raw. Her daughter won’t go out anymore and is having trouble concentrating. The family has filed a lawsuit; the police chief there said he can’t comment on pending litigation.

Dr. Richard Dudley, a child psychiatrist in New York, said many officers have implicit bias that would prompt them to see Black children as older, and therefore more threatening, than they are. For instance, police are more likely to think that a Black child’s phone is a gun, he said.

It all becomes a vicious cycle, Dudley said. Police react badly to these kids, and to the people they know, so kids react badly to police, leading them to react badly to kids.

Minority children have negative everyday dealings with police and are traumatized by them. “Whatever they’ve seen police officers do in the past,” Dudley said, “all of that is the backdrop for their encounter with a police officer.”

So when that encounter occurs, they may be overreactive and hypervigilant, and it may appear that they’re not complying with police commands when, really, they’re just very scared.

The police are not thinking, “I have this panicked, frightened kid that I need to calm down,” Dudley said.

To Dudley and to Jackson, the Johns Hopkins criminologist, de-escalation training for police isn't enough. It must include elements of implicit bias and of mental health, and it must be integrated into an officer's everyday work.

Jackson said he's been working very closely with Black kids in Baltimore, and the first thing he hears often is that they can't go talk to an officer unless that officer is in plainclothes.

"There is a visceral reaction," he said. "And that's trauma. And some of these kids, even if they haven't been stopped over and over again, it's embedded in the fabric of what America has been for a really long time, and they know what that uniform represents in their community."

Some of the cases have prompted changes. In the District of Columbia, for example, police officers now do not handcuff children under 13, except when the children are a danger to themselves or others.

The policy was revamped in 2020 after incidents in which two children were arrested: When a 10-year-old was held in a suspected robbery, authorities said that police had correctly followed protocol in handcuffing the child, but then a few weeks later police handcuffed a 9-year-old who had committed no crime.

Age-specific force policies are rare, according to Lisa Thureau, who founded the group Strategies for Youth to train police departments to more safely interact with kids. She said at least 20 states have no policies setting the minimum age of arrest.

Without explicit policies, "the default assumption of an officer is, quite reasonably, that they should treat all youth like adults," Thureau said.

The Cincinnati Police Department also changed its use-of-force policy after an officer [zapped an 11-year-old Black girl](#) with a stun gun for shoplifting. The department's policy allowed police to shock kids as young as 7 but changed in 2019 to discourage the use of such weapons on young children.

Attorney Al Gerhardstein, who represented the girl and helped petition for policy change, said the pattern of force he found against kids of color in the city raised alarm bells for him. Records he obtained and shared with the AP show that Cincinnati police used stun guns against 48 kids age 15 or younger from 2013 to 2018. All but two of those children were Black.

But in most departments, there is little discussion around children and policing and few options available to parents aside from a lawsuit. If a settlement is reached, it's often paid by the city instead of by the officers involved.

In Aurora, Colorado, for example, a video of police handcuffing Black children went viral. The video showed the girls, ages 6, 12, 14 and 17, face down in a parking lot. The youngest wore a pink crown and sobbed for her mother. Another begged the police, “Can I hug my sister next to me?”

Police said they couldn’t get cuffs on the youngest because her hands were too small.

Their mother, Brittney Gilliam, was taking them to the nail salon. She was stopped by police because they believed she was driving a stolen car. She was not; she had Colorado plates and a blue SUV. The stolen car had Montana plates.

Officials said the officers had made mistakes, but they remained on duty. The officers did not face any criminal charges, and there have been no significant changes to their policies when it comes to children.

The family has since filed a lawsuit.

The family of X’Zane Watts also filed a lawsuit in Charleston, West Virginia, after a 2017 incident that began when police mistakenly suspected the eighth grader of a burglary.

X’Zane said he was playing in an alley near his home with his 2-year-old cousin when three white men in plainclothes got out of their car and started running toward them with weapons drawn, shouting obscenities. They chased him into his house and put a gun to his head, slamming him to the ground.

His mother, Charissa Watts, saw it happen from the kitchen. She didn’t know they were police. Neither did X’Zane.

“The wrong flinch, they could have shot him,” she said. “The wrong words out of my mouth, they could have shot me.”

In the years since, Charleston ushered in a new mayor and a new police chief. They pointed to changes they have made: banning some weapons and chokeholds, requiring body cameras and offering more mental health and de-escalation training.

“Since I became chief of police, we have worked to review policies and provide our officers with the tools they need to keep all our residents and visitors safe — but together we can always do more,” Chief Tyke Hunt said.

The Watts family sued, charging that officers profiled X’Zane. They reached a settlement in 2019.

The year after the incident was difficult, X’Zane said. His elbow, injured in the altercation, kept him from playing football; he was angry and distracted. The family moved across town to escape the memories of that day.

Today, X'Zane is doing much better. He hopes to join the U.S. Air Force. And he's been able to put the incident behind him — to a point.

“It has put a longtime fear in me,” he said.