



RESEARCH ARTICLE

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From Protection to Vigilance: A Narrative Study of Policing, Race, and Mental Health in the Life of a Black Man

Shane King MSW, LCSW*

Reflective Therapy LCSW, PLLC, Danbury, CT, US.

ABSTRACT

This study uses narrative inquiry to explore how a Black man from a marginalized community makes sense of repeated encounters with law enforcement throughout his life. Guided by the social-ecological framework and informed by research on structural racism and race-based trauma, it examines how experiences such as racial profiling, traffic stops, and police misconduct affect trust, safety, and perceptions of legitimacy. The narrative analysis traces the timeline of these experiences, key turning points, and the meaning attributed to police interactions over time. Results indicate that early views of police as protectors gradually changed into caution, hypervigilance, and distrust after repeated perceived unjust encounters. Instead of being isolated events, these interactions became part of the participant's understanding of safety, self-protection, and his relationship with law enforcement. The study adds to social work scholarship by showing how policing experiences can serve as an ongoing social determinant of mental health and influence identity, behavior, and trust in institutions among men of color in marginalized communities.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received Date: 13 Jun 2026

Accepted Date: 22 Jul 2026

Published Date: 30 Jul 2026

KEYWORDS

Narrative inquiry, Policing, Racial profiling, Mental health, Social work, Men of color, Police legitimacy.

Introduction

Police encounters represent an important yet understudied social determinant of mental health among men of color in the United States. Research consistently demonstrates that experiences involving racial profiling, police surveillance, and excessive force are associated with increased anxiety, depressive symptoms, hypervigilance, and psychological distress. However, quantitative studies often measure the prevalence of these outcomes without examining how individuals interpret and incorporate these experiences into their identities and understandings of safety over time.

Narrative inquiry offers an opportunity to move beyond documenting adverse outcomes by examining how individuals make meaning of experiences throughout their lives. Rather than treating police encounters as isolated incidents, narrative inquiry situates these experiences within broader social, historical, and institutional contexts that shape identity, trust, and perceptions of legitimacy. This study therefore explores how a Black man from a marginalized community narratively constructs meaning from repeated encounters with law enforcement across the life course.

Background

The relationship between law enforcement and communities of color has been shaped by longstanding patterns of surveillance, racial profiling, and disproportionate police contact. Black men continue to experience higher rates of police stops, searches, and arrests than White individuals, even after controlling for offense patterns and neighborhood characteristics. Previous

studies indicate that African American men often report police encounters as recurring experiences that shape their behavior in public spaces and interactions with authority figures [1]. Research consistently connects these encounters to negative mental health effects such as depression, anxiety, chronic stress, and hypervigilance. Studies by Alang et al. [2] and DeVlyder et al. [3] show that both direct and indirect exposure to police violence correlates with higher psychological distress among Black Americans. While this body of research highlights significant health impacts, it tends to overlook how individuals interpret these encounters and incorporate them into their identity, perceptions of safety, and trust in institutions. Most studies focus on prevalence and outcomes, neglecting the lived experiences and meaning-making processes that influence responses to policing over time.

Theoretical Framework

This study examined how interactions with law enforcement influence the identity, well-being, and perceptions of safety among men of color living in marginalized communities. Creswell & Poth [4] highlight that the study, using narrative inquiry, explored how individuals construct meaning from experiences with policing over time and how these experiences shape trust, legitimacy, and behavioral responses. Through an in-depth interview with a Black man describing his encounters with law enforcement, the study traced a shift from viewing police as protectors during childhood to experiencing distrust, heightened vigilance, and avoidance following repeated experiences of racial profiling and traffic stops.

Contact: Shane King, Reflective Therapy LCSW, PLLC, Danbury, CT, US.

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The study draws on scholarship regarding structural racism, race-based trauma, and the social-ecological framework. Research by Banaji et al. [5] demonstrates that structural racism entrenches profound inequalities in opportunities and outcomes. It originates from a complex interplay of laws, policies, societal systems, and deeply rooted stereotypes, all of which profoundly influence policing practices and reinforce racial disparities, thereby perpetuating systemic injustice across society. Structural racism offers a crucial lens for understanding how historical and institutional practices continue to shape policing patterns and drive disparities in treatment experienced by marginalized communities. These institutional frameworks affect not only direct interactions with law enforcement but also shape community perceptions of fairness, legitimacy, and safety. Experiences with policing may occur directly through personal encounters or indirectly through witnessing or learning about similar experiences involving family members, peers, or media reports. From a clinical perspective, both direct and vicarious exposure to race-based stressors can have significant mental health consequences, including anxiety, depression, anger, hypervigilance, and chronic stress [6]. Repeated exposure to these experiences may contribute to emotional distress and influence how individuals interpret future interactions with law enforcement.

The social-ecological framework further supports this analysis by recognizing that experiences with policing occur within interconnected social systems operating at multiple levels, including the individual, family, community, and broader society [7]. Individual perceptions of police are shaped not only by personal encounters but also by family socialization, community narratives, neighborhood environments, and societal discussions regarding policing and race. For example, an individual who was socialized during childhood to view police officers as protectors may later reinterpret those beliefs following personal experiences with racial profiling or exposure to police misconduct involving others in their community.

Empirical research consistently demonstrates the mental health consequences associated with policing experiences. Studies by Alang et al. [2] and DeVolder et al. [3] found that experiences involving police brutality, racial profiling, and aggressive policing practices are associated with increased symptoms of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress among communities of color. However, while quantitative studies document these outcomes, they often do not explain how individuals interpret these experiences or incorporate them into broader understandings of identity, trust, and safety over time.

Narrative inquiry is particularly well suited to address this gap because it focuses on how individuals construct meaning from lived experiences and organize those experiences into coherent life stories. By examining the participant's account chronologically and attending to important turning points in his relationship with law enforcement, this study seeks to deepen understanding of how repeated police encounters shape perceptions of legitimacy, emotional well-being, and everyday strategies for navigating interactions with police.

Research Question

The guiding research question for this study is: How does a Black man from a marginalized community construct meaning from encounters with law enforcement across the life course?

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry

This study employed narrative inquiry as both the methodological framework and the research design. Narrative inquiry seeks to understand how individuals make sense of experiences through storytelling and how meanings evolve over time within specific social and historical contexts. Unlike thematic approaches that identify patterns across multiple participants, narrative inquiry privileges the chronology, sequence, and interpretation embedded in an individual's account [8]. The purpose of this study was therefore not to generate generalizable findings but to understand how one participant interpreted experiences with law enforcement and integrated them into broader understandings of safety, trust, and identity. The study draws on the narrative traditions established by Clandinin and Connelly [9], emphasizing lived experience, temporality, and meaning-making.

Participant

The study involved one Black male participant, aged 18 to 65, who reported multiple direct encounters with law enforcement throughout his life. A single-participant narrative inquiry is appropriate when the goal is to obtain rich contextual understanding rather than representativeness or generalizability. The value of the study lies in narrative depth and interpretive richness rather than in sample size.

Ensure Rigor

An in-depth narrative interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve the participant's voice and maintain the integrity of the narrative account. The transcript was imported into NVivo to facilitate data organization, excerpt retrieval, and an audit trail throughout the analytic process. NVivo served as a data management tool rather than the primary analytic method.

Consistent with narrative inquiry, analysis focused on understanding the participant's experiences as a coherent life story rather than fragmenting the data into isolated codes or categories. Attention was given to the chronology of events, significant turning points, changes in meaning over time, and the social contexts surrounding encounters with law enforcement. The analysis examined how the participant described early perceptions of police, experiences that challenged those perceptions, and the subsequent development of strategies related to safety, trust, and self-protection.

To enhance trustworthiness, the researcher maintained detailed analytic memos documenting interpretive decisions and reflections throughout the analytic process. Reflexive journaling was used to examine assumptions, monitor potential biases, and increase transparency regarding the researcher's influence on interpretation. Credibility was further supported by maintaining a clear audit trail and grounding interpretations

in the participant's own words and narrative sequence [10,11].

Rather than seeking thematic saturation or coding reliability, the objective of this narrative inquiry was to achieve narrative depth, contextual richness, and a nuanced understanding of how the participant constructed meaning from experiences with policing across the life course.

Describe Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations were central throughout the research process due to the sensitive nature of discussing experiences involving racial profiling and law enforcement. Prior to participation, the researcher explained the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, procedures for audio recording, and measures to protect confidentiality. Informed consent was obtained before the interview began.

To safeguard privacy, pseudonyms were used and identifying information was removed or altered during transcription and reporting. The participant was informed that participation could be discontinued at any time without penalty and that responses could be withheld if questions caused discomfort.

The researcher recognized that discussing experiences involving policing and discrimination could evoke emotional distress. Consequently, the interview was conducted using open-ended questions, active listening, and a participant-centered approach, allowing the participant to guide the pace and direction of the storytelling. This approach promoted respect, autonomy, and psychological safety throughout the interview process [12].

Guidelines for addressing reflexivity

Reflexivity was an essential component of this narrative inquiry. The researcher engaged in ongoing reflection on how personal experiences, professional identity, and perspectives on policing could influence data collection, interpretation, and the representation of the participant's story. Denzin and Lincoln [11] emphasize that qualitative researchers must critically examine how their social positions and lived experiences shape the research process.

The researcher acknowledged holding multiple roles in the study, including researcher, social work professional, and an individual with personal experiences related to police profiling. Recognizing these perspectives was important for increasing transparency and minimizing the influence of assumptions on interpretation.

Throughout the study, reflexive journaling documented reactions, assumptions, and evolving interpretations. The researcher paid close attention to distinguishing the participant's experiences and meanings from the researcher's own. This process supported a disciplined approach to interpretation while preserving the participant's narrative voice and perspective.

Narrative inquiry recognizes that researchers are not detached observers but active participants in the co-construction of knowledge. By explicitly acknowledging positionality and engaging in reflexive practice, the study sought to enhance credibility, transparency, and trustworthiness while maintaining

respect for the complexity of the participant's lived experiences [4].

Sampling

Convenience sampling was used to recruit a participant who met the study inclusion criteria: self-identification as a man of color, age between 18 and 65 years, and at least one direct interaction with law enforcement. The participant was recruited through community networks familiar to the researcher.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a semi-structured, in-depth interview lasting approximately one hour. Open-ended questions encouraged the participant to describe experiences with police chronologically, beginning with childhood perceptions and extending through adulthood.

Questions focused on

- Early socialization regarding police.
- Significant encounters with law enforcement.
- Emotional responses to those encounters.
- Changes in trust and perceptions of legitimacy over time.
- Behavioral adaptations developed in response to interactions with police.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to preserve narrative detail and participant voice.

Narrative Analysis

Data analysis followed the principles of narrative analysis as described by Creswell & Poth [4], highlighting the chronology of events, significant turning points, and shifts in meaning throughout the participant's story.

Rather than fragmenting the interview into disconnected codes, the participant's account was treated as a coherent life narrative. Attention was given to:

- How the participant organized experiences over time.
- Turning points that altered perceptions of police legitimacy.
- The meanings attached to encounters with law enforcement.
- The relationship between individual experiences and broader social contexts.

NVivo was used solely as an organizational tool to manage interview excerpts and maintain an audit trail, rather than as the primary analytic strategy. Because this was a single-case narrative inquiry, the goal was narrative depth and contextual understanding rather than thematic saturation.

Findings

Early Socialization: Police as Protectors

The participant described growing up with a generally positive understanding of law enforcement. Police officers were initially viewed as authority figures responsible for maintaining safety and protecting communities.

Family messages emphasized respect for authority and compliance during police encounters, reinforcing the belief that cooperation would ensure safety.

Turning Point: Experiences of Racial Profiling

This understanding began to change following several encounters that the participant interpreted as racial profiling. Repeated traffic stops and interactions perceived as unjust challenged earlier assumptions regarding fairness and legitimacy. The participant described these experiences not as isolated events but as cumulative moments that gradually reshaped his understanding of policing.

Trust was not lost during a single encounter. Instead, distrust developed incrementally through repeated experiences and observations of police interactions involving others in his community.

Identity, Hypervigilance, and Strategic Compliance

As experiences accumulated, the participant described adopting strategies designed to minimize risk during police encounters.

These strategies included carefully monitoring body language, limiting verbal responses, maintaining compliance, and avoiding unnecessary interactions with law enforcement.

The participant described becoming increasingly vigilant whenever police officers were present. Rather than experiencing reassurance, police presence often generated anxiety and heightened awareness.

This shift illustrates how repeated encounters became integrated into identity and everyday decision-making.

Vicarious Experiences and Community Narratives

The participant emphasized that his perceptions were influenced not only by personal experiences but also by widely publicized incidents involving police misconduct.

Observing similar experiences among friends, family members, and media reports reinforced concerns regarding fairness and accountability.

These vicarious experiences contributed to the perception that negative encounters with police were not exceptional events, but predictable risks associated with being a Black man in America.

Accountability and Legitimacy

Questions regarding accountability emerged throughout the participant's narrative.

Although the participant supported reforms such as body-worn cameras, he questioned whether accountability mechanisms were consistently implemented or effective in addressing misconduct.

Community policing and stronger relationships between officers and residents were viewed as potential strategies to improve legitimacy and rebuild trust.

Discussion

The findings illustrate how repeated police encounters become ingrained in broader narratives of identity, safety, and institutional trust. Ongoing negative interactions erode emotional resilience

and solidarity between individuals and law enforcement, undermining perceptions of legitimacy and belonging. From a social-ecological perspective, these experiences occur across multiple levels—spanning personal psychological responses, family socialization, community narratives, and structural inequalities. Importantly, the participant's account indicates that mistrust accumulates over time rather than forming instantly. The account corroborates existing research indicating that police encounters among Black men are often perceived as cumulative rather than isolated incidents. These repeated interactions can significantly shape perceptions of legitimacy, trust, and belonging over time [1]. Consistent with prior studies, both direct experiences and vicarious exposure to police misconduct foster increased caution, hypervigilance, and behavioral adaptations aimed at reducing risk during future encounters. These findings underscore that the impacts of policing extend beyond individual incidents, influencing broader community notions of safety, identity, and institutional trust among communities of color. Moreover, the shift from viewing police as protectors to perceiving them as potential threats tends to occur gradually through ongoing experiences and observations.

Implications for Social Work

This study contributes to social work scholarship by illustrating how policing may function as an ongoing social determinant of mental health. Social workers serving communities affected by aggressive policing should recognize that police encounters may influence anxiety, hypervigilance, trust in institutions, and behavioral adaptation long after specific incidents occur. Trauma-informed interventions and culturally responsive practices should therefore consider experiences with policing as an important component of assessment and treatment planning.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study involved a single participant and therefore does not aim to generalize statistically. Ilan [13] notes that small-sample studies, such as those involving police officers, often fail to capture the full complexity and diversity of law enforcement-citizen interactions in larger populations. Second, the findings reflect one individual's interpretation of events and may not align with others' experiences. Finally, narrative inquiry recognizes that stories evolve over time and may be shaped by changing social contexts and retrospective interpretation.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how repeated encounters with law enforcement can become integrated into broader narratives of identity, safety, and legitimacy among men of color in marginalized communities. By privileging narrative meaning-making over thematic generalization, the study extends the existing literature beyond mere documentation of adverse outcomes and contributes to qualitative social work scholarship on race, policing, and mental health. The findings suggest that policing should be understood not solely as a criminal justice issue but also as an important social determinant of psychological well-being and community trust.

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