

Injustice in the Field? A Look at Field Booking Arrests in a Southeastern City

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Abstract

Issuing citations in lieu of arrests, or field booking arrests, is touted as beneficial by reducing the costs for the criminal legal system; reducing the burdens placed on individuals by avoiding arrest records, possible pretrial detention, and financial obligations; bettering community relationships with officers; increasing officer safety and efficiency; and reducing jail overcrowding. Yet, there are still substantial concerns that the practice may be disproportionately utilized and lead to net-widening. Using data obtained from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, we assess a snapshot of field booking arrests in a Southeastern city. Specifically, we assess if there are racial and gender disparities in who is being arrested as well as the severity of the charges. We also assess where these arrests are occurring to see if certain areas and neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted. We find most field booking arrests are given to Black men. Evidence also suggests they are largely being utilized with marginalized populations, particularly the unhoused and in communities of Color. Through this assessment we gain some insight into who is bearing the burden of field booking arrests and their potential collateral consequences. Suggestions for further research and how police may consider more equitable procedures are discussed.

Keywords: police, law enforcement, race, ethnicity, gender, justice, legitimacy

Introduction

The persistence of citizens of Color – men, women, and children – encountering excessive force at the hands of police across the United States (U.S.) (and the world) is a vivid reminder of the prolonged tumultuous relationship between the criminal legal system and communities of Color. Communities of Color, as well as groups with a lower socioeconomic status (SES), and the housing insecure, among others, are often vulnerable targets to the receipt of marginalization from the police (see Reid, 2000). Furthermore, the targeting of these marginalized communities by law enforcement is evidenced by police strategies such as zero tolerance policing and stop-and-frisk, which are heavily criticized by scholars and activists (Boyles, 2015; Butler, 2017; Crump, 2019). Black Americans are more likely to be stopped by police, have more contact in general with law enforcement, and have an increased risk of experiencing force at the hands of police than white Americans (Davis et al., 2018). These statistics suggest marginalized communities, particularly those of Color, are targeted, harassed, and over-policed throughout the U.S. (Evans et al., 2014; Weisburd et al., 2015). Yet, these communities also are often

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overlooked and underserved when they are in need of service and protection (Boehme et al., 2022; Rios, 2011).

The strained relationship between law enforcement and communities of Color has existed since the founding of America, from the Fugitive Slave Act (Reichel, 1988; Walker, 1980), and Black Codes and Jim Crow laws (Anderson, 2016; Bass, 2001), to the treatment of those involved in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s (Alexander, 2011; Braga et al., 2019), all fueling the modern era of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2011; Sawyer & Wagner, 2023). In 1994, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (1994 Crime Bill) allotted over \$30 billion dollars¹ to law enforcement and crime prevention efforts (Evans & Owens, 2007). Driven largely by a moral panic (Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009) around “super predators” (Pizarro et al., 2007), the 1994 Crime Bill contributed to aggressive policing strategies and mass incarceration (Rosenfeld, 2020), with the burden being felt most in marginalized communities of Color (Alexander, 2011; Forman, 2017), further deepening the divide between police and the community. Following the attacks of 9/11, federal programs, such as 1033 and 1122, allowed local law enforcement to obtain military equipment and greatly attributed to the militarization of policing (ACLU, 2014; Ray, 2021) and creation of the “warrior” cop (Carlson, 2020). While the Obama Administration greatly invested in police reform and improving community relationships (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015), concerns over institutional and systemic racism within law enforcement remain high, particularly among marginalized groups (Boyles, 2019; Garza, 2020).

The President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) states “[b]uilding trust and nurturing legitimacy on both sides of the police/citizen divide is the foundational principle underlying the nature of realities between law enforcement and the communities they serve” (p. 1). Legitimacy is defined as the perceived effectiveness, fairness, and legality of police (Tankebe, 2013; Tyler, 2005). Legitimacy stems from the concepts of procedural and distributive justice which entail the ideas of fair, just, and neutral law enforcement actions and decisions (Tyler & Jackson, 2013). Personal encounters involving fairness and respect between police and the public are a way legitimacy can be built through the principles of procedural and distributive justice which may increase the public’s confidence in police. Officers who portray fairness in their actions can build community trust and in turn increase the legitimacy of law enforcement (Tyler & Fagan, 2008; Tyler & Fischer, 2014).

In the present work, we look at one police department in the Southeastern U.S. that has embraced promoting legitimacy, and the other recommendations from the Task Force (2015) – including addressing the diversity of officers, racial bias training, and increased use of force policies and training – to better serve the community. One particular policy is the use of field booking arrests, otherwise known as a citation in lieu of arrest, which are when an arrest is made in the field, the accused is booked and released in the field, and then provided an order to appear for further proceedings instead of being taken to the police station or jail for traditional booking. Such citations are often used for traffic as well as more minor, misdemeanor offenses (Thacher, 2023). These “arrests” not only streamline the booking process for officers, but (in theory) make the encounter less burdensome and traumatic for citizens. However, like many policies, there are potential detrimental effects if field booking arrests result in a net-widening of who is entangled in the system, or if they are disparately used on certain populations. Using data obtained from a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request, we assess a snapshot of field booking arrests in Columbia, South Carolina. Specifically, we assess if there are racial and gender disparities in who is being arrested as well as the severity of the charges. We also assess where these arrests are occurring to see if certain areas and neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted. Through this assessment we gain some insight into who is bearing the burden of field booking arrests and their potential collateral consequences. We begin with an overview of field booking arrests and how they may or may not serve the aims of justice

and legitimacy. We then provide an overview of Columbia, South Carolina and its police department before presenting our assessment of field booking arrests.

Justice, Legitimacy, & Policing

In general, social psychologists say “justice” exists when procedures, distributions, and interactions align with one’s expectations and shared social rules (Cohen, 1986; Hegtvedt & Markovsky, 1995; Jasso, 1980). Examinations of procedural justice within the criminal legal system began in legal psychology where it aimed to find people’s preexisting agreement with and perceived legitimacy of court decisions (Lind, 1982), and was later applied to police encounters. Procedural justice focuses on the perceived fairness of the process more so than the outcome (Lind, 1982; Tyler & Lind, 1988). Specifically, it is thought individuals are more likely to view law enforcement as legitimate and trustworthy if they have been treated in a just and fair manner, regardless of the officer’s decision or situational result (Tyler, 1990). This can occur through allowing the individual to explain themselves, officers treating them with respect, and police being neutral decision makers (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Nagin & Telep, 2020). Research finds a strong statistical relationship between procedural justice and trust, legitimacy, and acceptance of police procedures, as well as outcomes, or distributive justice (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tyler & Folger, 1980; Wolfe et al., 2016).

Building on this theoretical framework, scholars have also examined whether citizens find law enforcement legitimate and trustworthy. Research suggests legitimacy and trustworthiness in police is generally low, but particularly low for people of Color (Engel, 2005; Johnson et al., 2017; Tyler, 2005). Tyler (2005) argues that people of Color’s trust in police is heavily based on the procedural fairness of the policies and practices law enforcement employ. Research aligns with this argument as Black individuals are more commonly victims of police procedural injustice than their white counterparts (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; Gau & Brunson, 2010). Furthermore, shifting community racial and ethnic composition is associated with increased reports of discriminatory encounters with law enforcement (Stewart et al., 2009). These findings point to the importance of police following just and fair procedures for all citizens, but particularly those that are marginalized and vulnerable. Yet, while process is important, outcomes also matter in who is likely to bear the burden of the criminal legal system.

Social psychology demonstrates that in addition to procedures, individuals often evaluate experiences based on the outcomes of the encounter, then they adjust their behavior and attitude accordingly (Lind & Tyler, 1988). Tyler (1990) addressed both procedural and distributive justice in his theory of legitimacy of the criminal legal system. In this context, distributive justice is defined as the perceived fairness on the distribution of outcomes delivered by police, such as stops, searches, tickets, and arrests (Greenberg & Tyler, 1987; McLean, 2020). Therefore, police are viewed as more legitimate when they allocate services and outcomes evenly and fairly (Tyler, 2003). Many studies find distributive justice to be an important predictor of legitimacy, not just for police, but for all criminal legal officials (Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Tankebe, 2013; Tyler, 1990; Wolfe et al., 2016). Recent findings suggest distributive justice judgements are conditioned by procedural justice assessments, thus contextualizing why procedures are significant for legitimacy (McLean, 2020). Applying a racialized lens, extensive research suggests that Blacks’ perceptions of law enforcement mirror who is policed, how they are treated, and where it occurs (Boehme et al., 2022; Cao, 2011; Isom, 2016; Schuck et al., 2008; Sharp & Johnson, 2009; Stewart et al., 2009; Taylor et al., 2010, 2015). Therefore, understanding how to facilitate justice and legitimacy in police-citizen interactions is essential to improving police-community relationships. One such way is to minimize the burden on citations for more minor offenses, such as utilizing field booking arrests.

Field Booking Arrests

The National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) (2019) defines a citation in lieu of arrest (i.e., a field booking arrest) as, “a written order, in lieu of a warrantless arrest, that is issued by a law enforcement officer or other authorized official, requiring a person to appear in a designated court or governmental office at a specified time and date.” These arrests were first used for traffic violations in New York in the early 20th century, with other states quickly adopting these practices (Busher, 1978; Thacher, 2023). However, only two states, New York and West Virginia, utilized these summonses in place of arrests for other minor violations (Warner, 1942). It was not until the 1960s that New York aimed to greatly extend the use of citations for non-traffic misdemeanor crimes through the Manhattan Summons Project (Busher, 1978; Thacher, 2023). The Project, which resulted from a collaboration between NYPD and the Vera Institute of Justice, eventually mandated police arrest and release for the majority of misdemeanors (Thacher, 2023). These two agencies, along with the court officials, worked together to create and improve screening criteria to help police decide when to issue a citation instead of making an arrest (Thacher, 2023). This policy was deemed successful through research and was endorsed by many organizations in the U.S., leading to more than two-thirds of all states implementing noncustodial arrests for other nontraffic misdemeanor crimes by the 1980s (Berger, 1972; Busher, 1978).

Issuing citations in lieu of arrests is claimed to be beneficial by reducing the costs for the criminal legal system (Hirschel & Dean, 1995), reducing the burdens placed on individuals by avoiding arrest records, possible pretrial detention, and financial obligations (Gless, 1980; Lowenkamp et al., 2013; Monaghan & Bewley-Taylor, 2013), bettering community relationships with officers (Busher, 1978), increasing officer safety and efficiency (Davis, 2005; IACP, 2016), and reducing jail overcrowding (Baumer & Adams, 2006). Even though some scholars identify the benefits of utilizing citations in lieu of arrest, there are still concerns about net-widening. Net-widening is the result of a program or policy that is supposed to reduce the amount of people who become entangled in the criminal legal system, but instead causes more individuals to become entrapped (Klein, 1979). Research, however, on whether citations in lieu of arrest are causing net-widening is scarce and the results are mixed. Some studies find evidence of net-widening (Brown & Frank, 2005; Horney, 1980), while others do not (Berger, 1972; Nadel et al., 2018). For instance, Horney (1980) found evidence of net-widening for simple assaults and larceny. Yet, a more recent study found net-widening was not a concern and, instead, the procedure was diverting individuals from the criminal legal system (Nadel et al., 2018).

There is evidence suggesting citations in lieu of arrests are being utilized in certain situations more than others. First, research finds people of Color are often more likely than whites to generally be arrested overall (Kochel et al., 2011; Rojek et al., 2004) and be traditionally arrested instead of receiving a citation (Brown & Frank, 2005; Camplain et al., 2020). Specifically, one study examined alcohol and drug-related arrests from 2009 to 2018, and found Latines², Blacks, and Indigenous Americans were all more likely than their white counterparts to be booked into jail rather than receive a citation and be released (Camplain et al., 2020).

Second, receiving a citation in lieu of arrest is also found to be dependent on the gender of the suspect, with men having a greater chance than women of being traditionally arrested instead of receiving a citation (Brown & Frank, 2005). And, previous criminal history increases the likelihood of a traditional arrest over a citation (Brown & Frank, 2005). Thus, while there are potential benefits for law enforcement and citizens alike for police to utilize field booking arrests, there is still a potential of harm to some, particularly more vulnerable, and often marginalized, citizens. The City of Columbia, South Carolina, Police Department employs such a procedure, and we aim to understand if there are potential disparate impacts for some citizens and communities or not.

The Current Study

Columbia, SC Police Department

Before the potential implications of field booking arrests in Columbia, South Carolina (SC), can be understood, we must first provide an overview of the social and political landscape of the city as well as its police department. Columbia, SC, is the state capital and located within Richland and Lexington Counties near the center of the state. With a population of 137,966, Columbia is the second largest city in the state and the 198th largest city in the U.S. Encompassing nearly 140 miles, the population density of Columbia is 1,015 individuals per square mile. It is home to the University of South Carolina, the flagship public university of the state (World Population Review, 2023), as well as two renowned historically Black colleges and universities – Allen University and Benedict College (UNCF, 2023). Columbia is also the home of the U.S. Army's Fort Jackson, greatly increasing its population of service members as well as veterans (World Population Review, 2023). It also has one of the oldest homeless shelters in the country (WIS, 2018), as well as a significant unhoused population (South Carolina Interagency Council of Homelessness, 2020). The city of Columbia is also substantially more liberal than much of the remainder of South Carolina (Best Neighborhood, 2023). The median age of Columbia residents is 28.2 years old, and 50.7% of the population identify as men. Whites compose 52.58% of the population of the city, whereas Blacks account for 39.6% (World Population Review, 2023), making the population of the capital city a bit more diverse than the overall state ([South Carolina overall: whites (68.9%); Blacks (26.3%)] U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). The racial distribution of the city is depicted in Image 1.³ The overall average individual earnings for the city are \$38,057 (World Population Review, 2023), lower than the overall state, which ranks 44th in the nation for average earnings (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Over 30% of the Black Columbia population live in poverty whereas around 14% of the white residents do (World Population Review, 2023), though both poverty rates are higher than the national rate of 12.8% (Creamer et al., 2022). Columbia has a diversity score of 88 out of 100, which is much higher than many cities in the South as well as the overall U.S., though significant segregation still exists (Best Neighborhood, 2023). Thus, Columbia is distinctly diverse and progressive in a myriad of ways, yet still struggles with vast wealth and education gaps (as well as a traumatic racialized history [see Fordham, 2008, 2009; Greene & Parry, 2021]), and thus overall equity.

The Columbia Police Department (CPD) has 436 sworn officers, 125 authorized professional staff, and an annual budget of over \$43 million. Black officers make up over 37% of the police force, with white officers accounting for 55%, thus closely aligning with the racial distribution of the city. Women make up over 21% of the police force. The patrol bureau is responsible for responding to calls for services as well as patrolling the city. They work across five regions within the city limits: East, Metro, North, South, and West (Fort Jackson is under U.S. Army jurisdiction), which are presented in Image 2. In 2021, CPD made 4,220 arrests and responded to over 174,000 calls for service (Columbia Police Department, 2021).

Research Questions

Field booking arrests (or citations in lieu of arrest) are a tool employed by the Columbia Police Department to enforce the law efficiently and effectively for more minor misdemeanor and felony⁴ violations. While such citations may have benefits for officers and citizens, they may also lead to net-widening if some people receive citations they may not have otherwise, or certain areas are policed and cited more than others. In other words, some communities may be overburdened by such enforcement. To begin to evaluate the equitability of field booking arrests in Columbia, we assess if there are racial or

gender disparities in field booking arrests as well as in the severity of charges. Given that South Carolina officers may issue a field booking arrest for actions ranging from nuisance offenses (e.g., loitering or noise

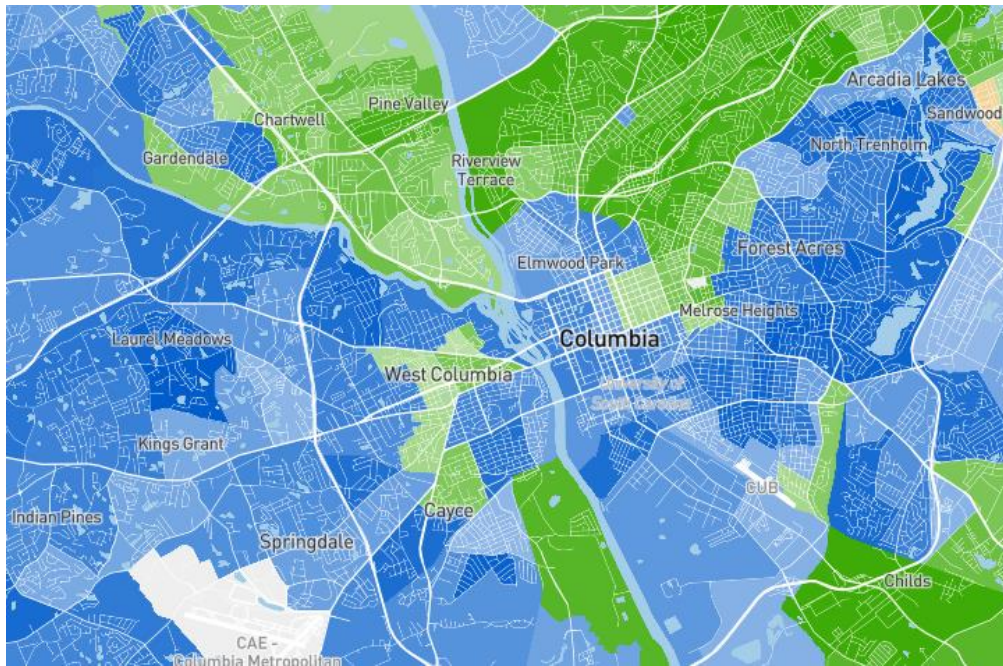


Image 1. Racial Distribution of Columbia, SC Neighborhoods

Image taken from *Best Neighborhood* (<https://bestneighborhood.org/race-in-columbia-sc/>)

Key: Blue = majority white; Green = majority Black; Yellow = majority Latine.

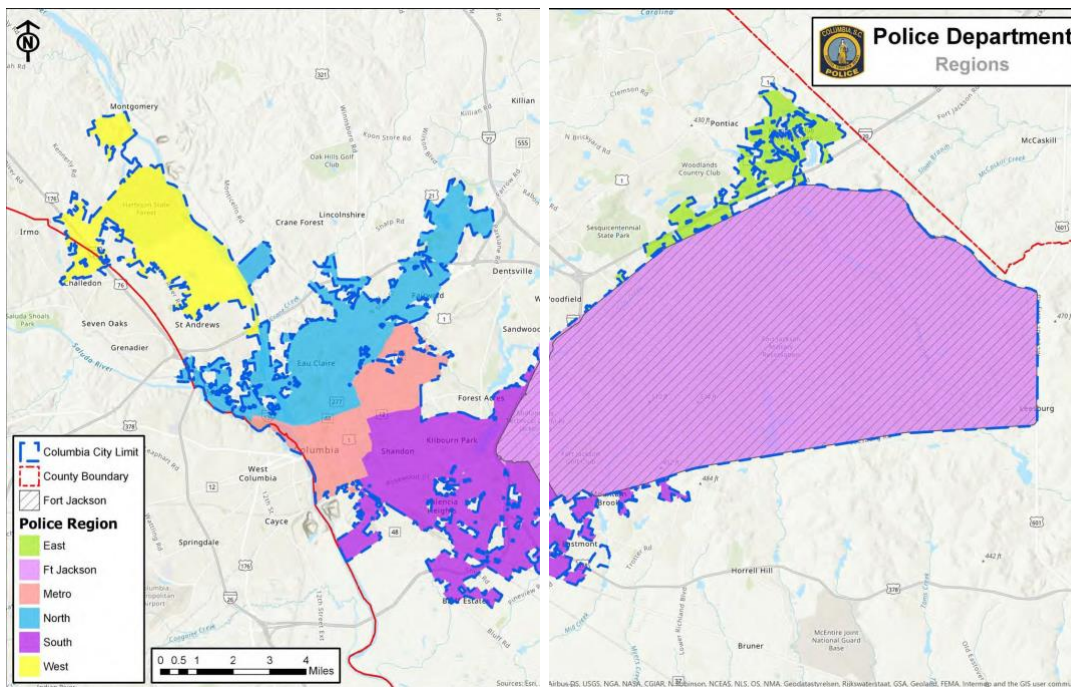


Image 2. Columbia Police Department Regions

Image taken from *Columbia Police Department Annual Report 2021*

(https://columbiapd.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/CPD_final-for-web-2021-annual-report.pdf)

violations; most often utilized on unhoused and younger populations) to minor-level felony offenses (e.g., assault), knowing the severity of the charges provides some insight into how certain behaviors committed by specific people are being policed in this way. We also examine where field booking arrests occur to explore if certain neighborhoods and locations are targeted more frequently than others. Specifically, we assess who is most likely to receive a field booking arrest and for what in Columbia, SC, and where in the city field booking arrests are most likely to occur. By answering these questions, we can better determine if field booking arrests are being employed in a just manner or if potential net-widening is occurring. Understanding if disparities exist will provide the foundation for future research into if such practices are truly just for all citizens.

Method

Data & Measures

Data were obtained from the CPD through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request in late 2022. To provide a snapshot of patrol officer practices, data on all field booking arrests was requested, including race, gender, age at arrest, charge, arrest location, and date of offense between January 1, 2022, and June 30, 2022. Thus, the raw data contained all cases within this six-month period. Data were provided in an Excel file by case number for each individual charge, encompassing 669 unique charges during this timeframe. Charges were listed by their Uniform Crime Report (UCR) code, statute, as well as in descriptive form. Charges were sorted by their UCR code and then ranked by severity based on statute and description. Traffic offenses were coded as 0, with the remaining charges ranked as either low (1), moderate (2), or high (3) severity level offenses. *Low level* offenses include public nuisance charges, such as public urination, loitering, littering, and noise ordinances, and account for 16.1% of the cases in the analytical sample. *Moderate level* offenses include things such as minor larceny, public drunkenness, trespassing, and resisting arrest, and account for 63.3% of the cases in the analytical sample. *High level* offenses include vandalism, weapon violations, and simple assault, and account for 20.6% of the cases in the analytical sample.⁵ Data were sorted and restructured by case number, thus tallying the number and severity of charges for each police encounter. The highest severity charge for each case was identified and serves as one of our primary variables of interest. When the data were restructured by case number instead of individual charges, the sample size became 507 unique cases with 23.3% having more than one charge. Traffic violations accounted for 109 of the cases and were removed from the analytical sample. Thus, the final data contains 398 unique cases of field booking arrests for non-traffic offenses within this six-month period.

The data also contained the race and gender of the individuals charged at each field booking arrest. *Gender* was classified as “M” for male and “F” for female and recoded into 0 = man, 1 = woman. Men compose 71.4% of the cases in the final analytical sample. Race was originally classified as W = white; B = Black; A = Asian American/Pacific Islander; I = Indigenous/Native American; and U = unknown. Ethnicity was also recorded as H = Latine-origin; N = non-Latine origin; or U = unknown. These classifications were recoded and combined, with anyone classified as Latine coded as Latine no matter their race and all other individuals coded by their race. The final analytical sample was coded for *race and ethnicity* as follows: 1 = white, 2 = Black, 3 = Latine, 4 = other race/ethnicity. Whites account for 28.1%, Blacks for 68.1%, Latines for 2.5%, and other races and ethnicities for 1.3% of the cases in the final analytical sample. Age ranged from 18 to 79 years of age with a median of 38 years.

Analytic Strategy

To determine if there were disparities across gender and race in the severity of field booking arrests, we graphed the distributions of severity of charges across groups by gender, race/ethnicity, and in combination. We also calculated chi-square statistics to determine if the differences between the groups were statistically significant. To better contextualize the distributions, we compared the percentages of arrests by race and gender to the population of Columbia, SC. Furthermore, we mapped the location of arrests to determine if there were specific neighborhoods or areas where arrests were more likely to occur. Graphs were created in Excel and all statistical analyses were completed in SPSS 27. All spatial analysis and mapping for arrest patterns were performed using ArcGIS Pro 2.7.1. The heat maps were created with Kernel density analysis in ArcGIS.

Results

Our investigation addresses two central lines of inquiry: 1) if there are racial and gender disparities in who is being arrested as well as the severity of charges; and 2) if certain areas and neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted by field booking arrests. To begin to answer the first, we initially examined the distribution of arrests between men and women and across racial and ethnic groups compared to the distributions of the Columbia, SC population. Looking at Table 1, we see whites make up about 49% of the Columbia population but account for less than 30% of all field booking arrests, with most of these being men. Furthermore, Blacks account for a little over 39% of the city population but make up 68% of all field booking arrests, with again the vast majority being men. And, despite already representing a smaller percentage of the city’s residents at 12%, Latines and other racial and ethnic groups account for less than 4% of field booking arrests. Of additional consequence, we see the majority of charges are for moderate-level severity, or incidents such as minor larceny, public drunkenness, trespassing, and resisting arrest, with Black men accounting for the largest proportion of these arrests. Thus, these distributions suggest there are disparities across race and gender in who is being arrested and the severity of the charges.

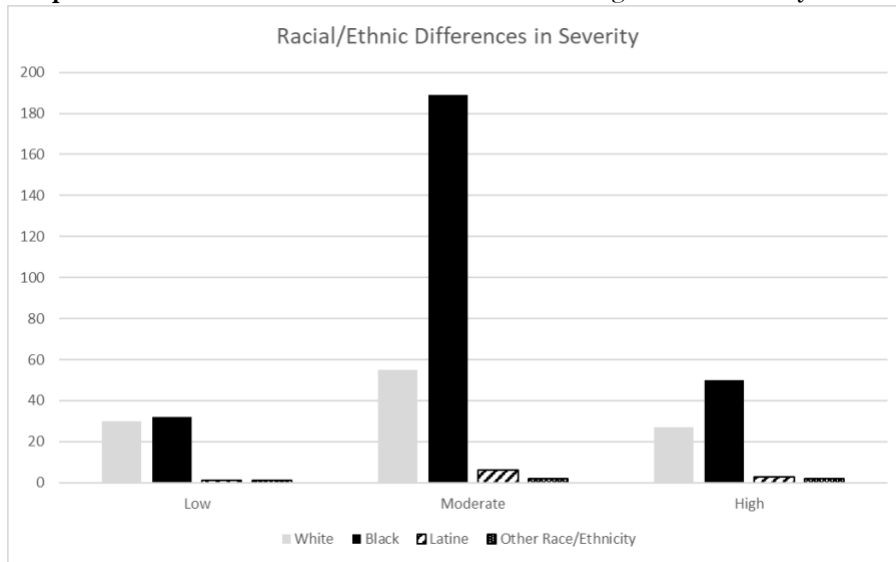
Table 1. Racial and Gender Distribution of Field Booking Arrests and City Population

Charge Severity	Low	Moderate	High	Total	Population
White					48.94%
Men	21 (5.3%)	43 (10.8%)	17 (4.3%)	81 (20.4%)	
Women	9 (2.3%)	12 (3.0%)	10 (2.5%)	31 (7.8%)	
Black					39.06%
Men	26 (6.5%)	139 (34.9%)	27 (6.8%)	192 (48.2%)	
Women	6 (1.5%)	50 (12.6%)	23 (5.8%)	79 (19.8%)	
Latine					5.80%
Men	1 (0.3%)	4 (1.0%)	2 (0.5%)	7 (1.8%)	
Women	0 (0.0%)	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.8%)	
Other Race/Ethnicity					6.20%
Men	1 (0.3%)	2 (0.5%)	1 (0.3%)	3 (0.8%)	
Women	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (0.3%)	1 (0.3%)	
Total	64 (16.1%)	252 (63.3%)	82 (20.6%)	398	137,966

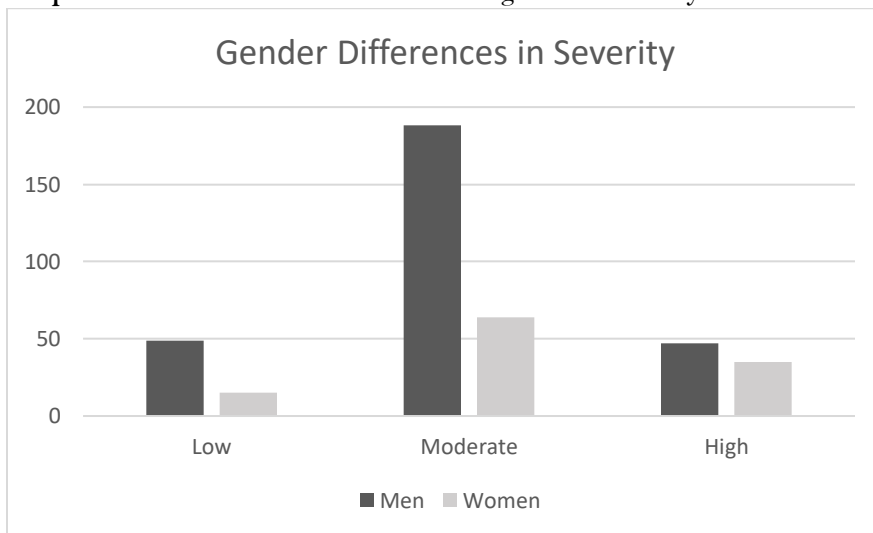
Note: Totals do not match or total 100% due to rounding; population numbers from <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/columbia-sc-population>

To further disentangle these disparities, we conducted a series of chi-square goodness of fit tests to determine if there were significant differences in arrest severity across and between race and gender groups. We first assessed racial and ethnic differences finding the distributions did significantly differ by racial categories, $\chi^2 (6, 398) = 19.74, p = .003$. We then assessed gender differences again finding distributions did significantly differ between men and women, $\chi^2 (2, 398) = 10.06, p = .007$. We then merged the groups to create four intersectional classifications: white men, men of Color, white women, and women of Color. We again found significant differences in the distribution of arrest severity across categories, $\chi^2 (6, 398) = 28.28, p = .000$. We then graphed each of these distributions in Graphs 1-3. Our findings reveal that the majority of field arrests fall in the moderate severity category and are given to Black men.

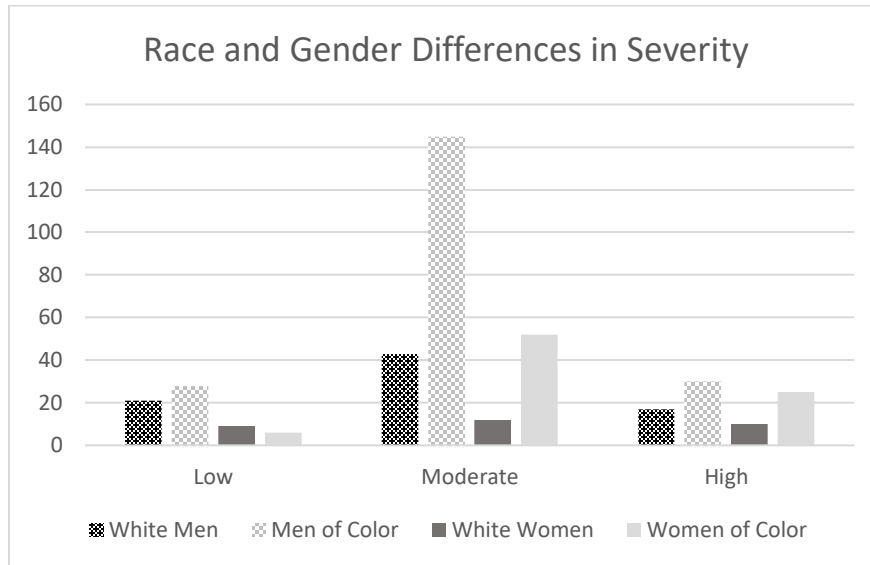
Graph 1. Racial and Ethnic Differences in Field Booking Arrests Severity



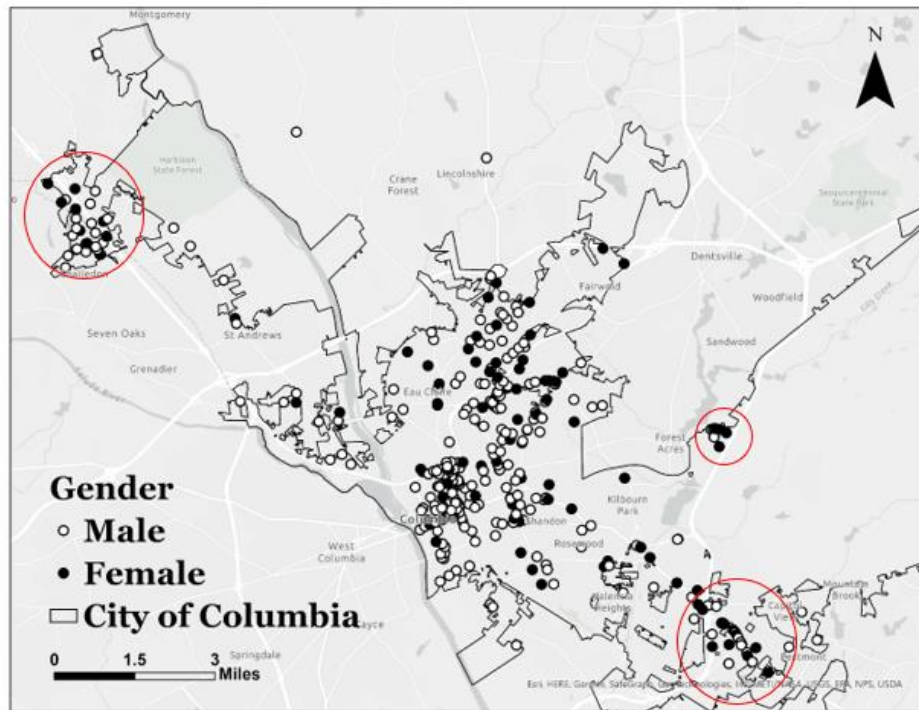
Graph 2. Gender Differences in Field Booking Arrests Severity



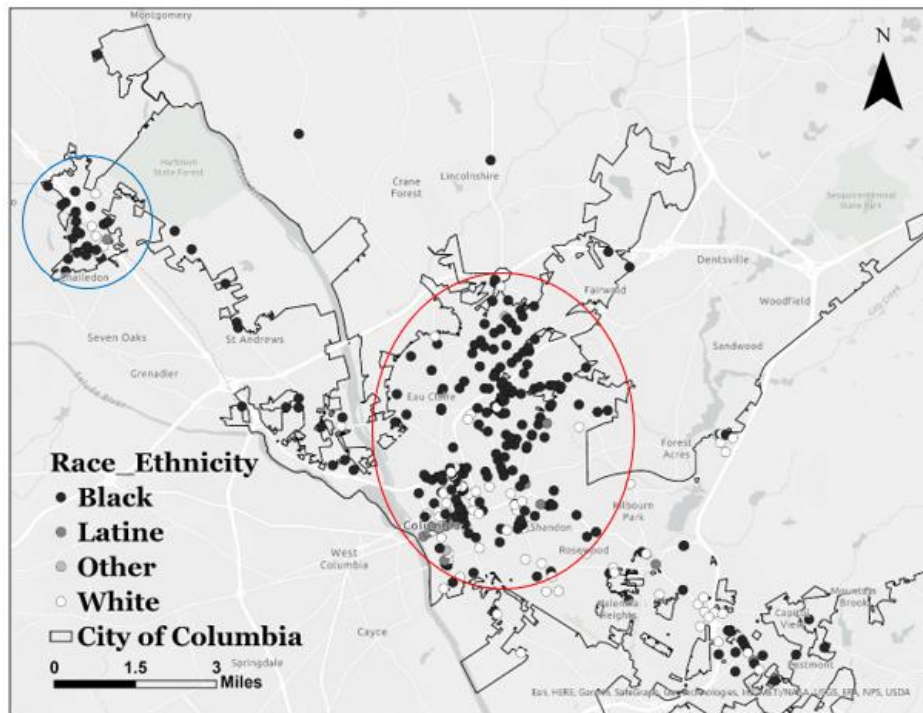
Graph 3. Race and Gender Differences in Field Booking Arrests Severity



To address our second question, if certain areas and neighborhoods are disproportionately targeted by field booking arrests, we employed GIS analysis. Map 1 represents the gender distribution of arrests across the city of Columbia. The map reveals no definitive gender divisions in locations of arrests. However, there are clusters of women arrested in the South Region as well as West Region (see Image 2 for CPD Regions; circled in red on Map 1), where there are several shopping districts. Given that women are more likely to be arrested for property offenses than other types (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.), then it is likely these potentially represent more minor cases of larceny. Map 2 reveals the locations of field booking arrests by race and ethnicity. Again, the significant differences revealed in earlier analyses are reiterated on the map. We do see that, overall, arrests are primarily clustered in the Metro and North Regions (circled in red on Map 2). Referring to Image 1, we see that the largest cluster of arrests corresponds to the areas in green in the downtown area between Melrose Heights and Elmwood Park and heading northeast, which are predominantly Black neighborhoods. Map 2 also reveals significant arrests clustered in a small portion of the West Region that houses the Columbiana Mall and numerous food and entertainment establishments frequented by teenagers (circled in blue on Map 2).

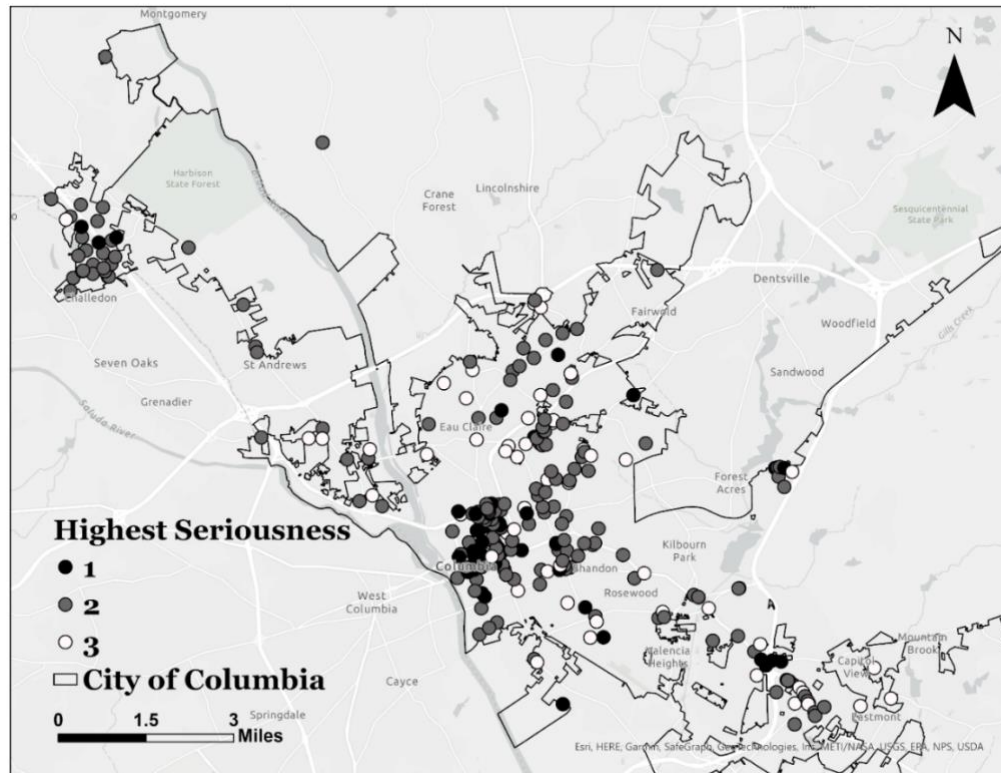


Map 1. Gender Distribution of Field Booking Arrests Across Columbia, SC



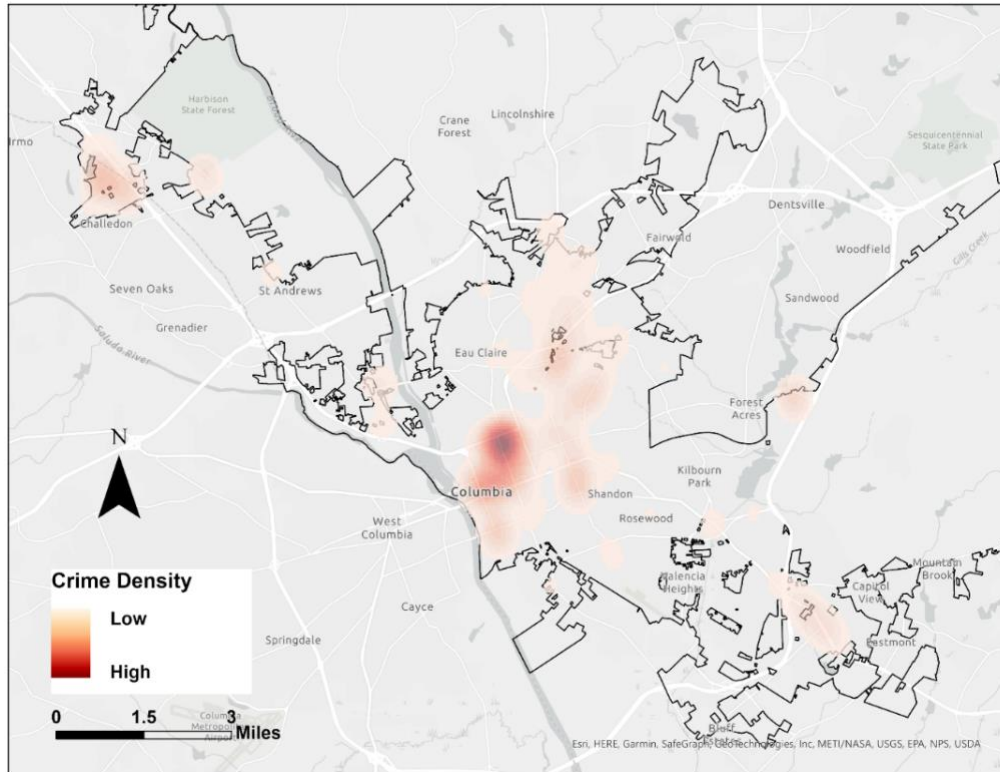
Map 2. Race and Ethnic Distribution of Field Booking Arrests Across Columbia, SC

Map 3 presents field booking arrest locations by charge severity. The distributions seen here align with the inferences related to gender and race/ethnicity distributions already discussed. As such, we see moderate severity charges, which include larceny, largely in the shopping districts noted in Maps 1 and 2. Furthermore, we see the clustering in the Metro and North Regions are also primarily moderate severity charges, which earlier results revealed were disproportionately given to people of Color.

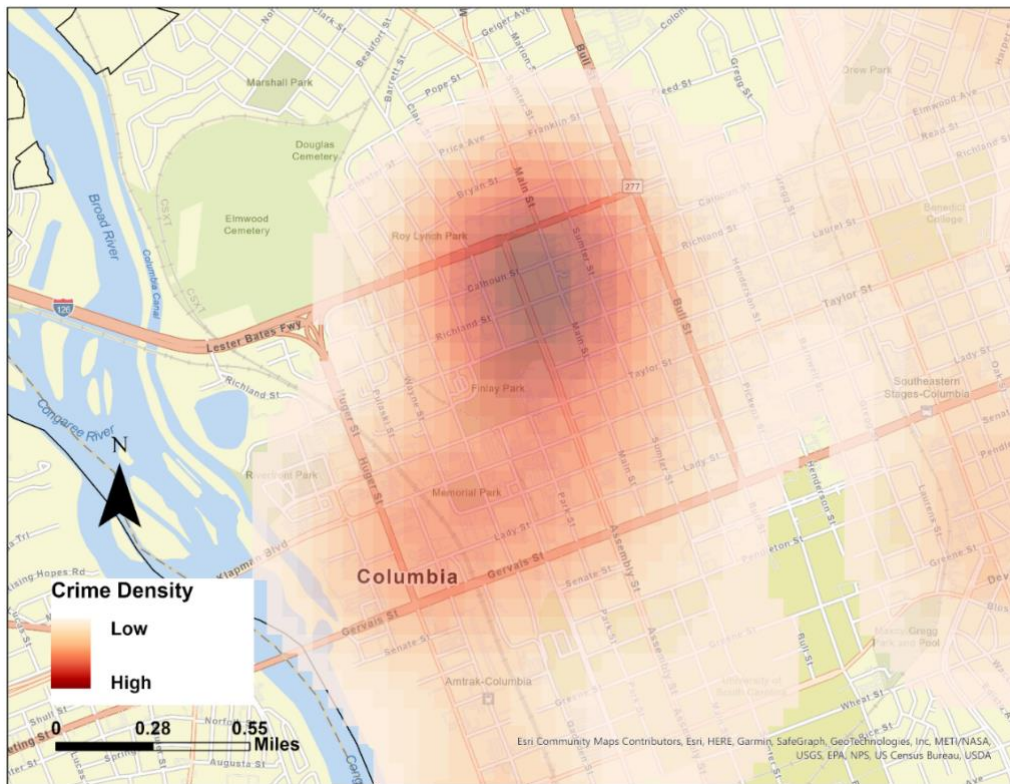


Map 3. Distribution of Field Booking Arrests by Charge Severity in Columbia, SC

Map 4 presents a heat map of field booking arrests in Columbia and reveals again that most field booking arrests are clustered in the areas on the northeast side of downtown that are a historically and predominantly Black neighborhoods, including the locations of Allen University and Benedict College. To further reiterate this point, we zoomed in the heat map to better understand exactly where the clustering of field booking arrests occurred; this is presented in Map 5. Upon closer examination of Map 5, we see the darkest colors, representing higher levels of arrests, encompass the area spanning Finley Park to the intersection of Bull Street and Elmwood Avenue. Finley Park is known for its unhoused population, and the remaining area captures the space between Columbia’s two largest homeless shelters as well as the bus station. Thus, while these assessments are not definitive, it appears field booking arrests are largely being used on vulnerable and marginalized populations, particularly the unhoused and in communities of Color.



Map 4. Heat Map of Field Booking Arrests in Columbia, SC



Map 5. Close-Up Heat Map of Field Booking Arrests in Columbia, SC

Discussion

In this descriptive, exploratory assessment, we sought to investigate the distribution of field booking arrests in a Southeastern city to determine the equitability of their use. Looking at data over a six-month period in 2022, we found there were significant disparities in who received field booking arrests across race/ethnicity and gender compared to the city population and that there were significant differences in the severity of charges, with men of Color receiving the bulk of citations, particularly for moderate to high level offenses. Furthermore, we assessed where these field booking arrests occurred, finding clusters in areas where vulnerable and marginalized populations gather, such as the unhoused, as well as within predominantly Black communities.

While, in general, field booking arrests are utilized because they are cheaper and more efficient for police, they aid in keeping the jail population down, and they are less traumatic and burdensome to citizens compared to a traditional arrest, it appears net-widening may be occurring within Columbia, SC. Based on our assessment, certain groups and areas may be being policed more and overly burdened with field arrest citations. While no definitive conclusion can be provided, based on previous literature, law enforcement could be overpolicing these communities because of proactive policing strategies. These strategies push officers to be more aggressive in controlling and combating crime by handling less interactions informally (Cobbina-Dungy & Jones-Brown, 2021). They are found to disproportionately target and impact marginalized communities (Brunson & Miller, 2006) because police give disproportionate attention to individuals within these communities as real, potential, or perceived perpetrators of crime (Perry, 2006). Looking at where field booking arrests are issued and to which citizens, there is evidence to speculate that this tool that is supposedly aimed at providing more “just” outcomes to citizens is actually widening the net of those entangled in the carceral state, with the burdens felt most by some of the most vulnerable citizens and those too often marginalized and oppressed by society and its institutions.

Yet, while our assessment reveals patterns that suggest this, data limitations do not allow us to determine such assertions conclusively. For instance, we were only provided the case information and no contextual information around each field booking arrest. Thus, we do not know the specific behaviors of the person arrested, what brought the attention of the police, nor the larger situation around the incident. Such information is essential to better parse out the issues of procedural and distributive justice within a given case. Additionally, we do not know if charges were for misdemeanor or felony-level offenses since South Carolina is one of the few states that utilizes field booking arrests for both types of offenses (National Conferences of State Legislatures, 2019). Furthermore, we cannot fully disentangle the complexities of varied identities and social statuses, including sexuality and SES, along with gender identity and racial and ethnic identities, with the data provided – factors known to influence citizen-police interactions (Clair, 2020; Nadal, 2020). While gender, race, and ethnicity are recorded, we do not know if individuals were asked to self-identify, if officers made assumptions about individual’s identities, or if the officer recorded identities accurately even if an individual did self-identify. Given the limited categorization of people within all captured classifications, a full assessment of experiences across the gender identity spectrum, range of racial and ethnic identities, and the impacts of other social statuses cannot be conducted. This is particularly important here as it seems many of these field booking arrests may be targeted at Columbia’s unhoused population, but this cannot be fully determined with the present data.

Moreover, we do not know how the patterns of field booking arrests compare to traditional arrests. While we do find disparities here, we do not know how the breadth and depth of them compare to arrests for more serious offenses. This is a worthwhile endeavor to assess the impact of field booking

arrests more fully within the larger criminal legal system. We also lack information on arresting officers, including their status identities as well as their record as a police officer. While this information was provided for some cases, it was missing in the vast majority (62%), making it difficult to assess patterns of officer behaviors. This information is needed to better disentangle if something systemic is happening or if these disparities reflect personal biases. It also must be remembered that police are the gatekeepers of the carceral state; they have the discretion to ignore certain behaviors or communities, to issue citations or give informal warnings, or to make traditional arrests. They have significant power and responsibilities as agents of the state, thus empirical attention is also warranted into police decision making and behaviors in field booking arrests contexts (and beyond). Why are police proactively patrolling these areas, and why are they choosing to issue these citations over other types of intervention (or lack thereof)? These questions cannot be addressed with the present data but warrant consideration in the future. Furthermore, our unit of analysis is cases, not individuals. Thus, we cannot say how many of these cases are the same individuals encountering police repeatedly. And finally, our data is limited to a six-month snapshot of field booking arrests; therefore, we do not know if these patterns have always existed nor if they persist presently. Despite these limitations, our results do raise questions that need additional investigation to determine if field booking arrests in Columbia, SC, are being applied fairly.

The City of Columbia's Police Department is consistently trying to improve the ways it serves Columbia's residents. The CPD is highly racially diverse and is dedicated to increasing the representation of women on the force as part of the 30X30 Advancing Women in Policing Initiative. The CPD is committed to serving all the residents of Columbia, with official liaisons for the LGBTQ community, partnerships with local healthcare providers to better serve those facing mental health crises, and collaborations with schools and community programs to strengthen relationships between youth and police (Columbia Police Department, 2021). Through assessments such as the one presented here, CPD may learn where they can continue to refine their policies and procedures to best serve all of Columbia's residents.

Conclusion

Police officers carry a significant portion of the responsibility in determining if just outcomes occur for those that encounter the criminal legal system. What this specific assessment reminds us is that even policies and procedures that appear to be just and a "better" option than traditional alternatives, may still cause potentially unnecessary harm, particularly for the most vulnerable. We must keep this fact in mind and assess all criminal legal practices through a lens that broadly looks at impacts and consequences for *all* people. Being in positions of power and influence, police are responsible for serving *all* citizens, not antagonizing those that may be in need of assistance over arrests (even if it is only a citation). Additional research is warranted to fully unpack the potential harms of all criminal legal policies, including the utilization of field booking arrests, not only in Columbia, SC, but everywhere in the U.S. The impacts of mass incarceration (Alexander, 2011) and the ever evolving and expanding reach of the carceral state (e.g., Butler, 2017; Crump, 2019; Davis, 2018; Schenwar et al., 2016; Tonry, 2011) remind us that we must critically assess all policies, procedures, and their varied and extensive impacts. Far too often, new procedures are implemented and touted as "good" and "just," particularly if such keep people out of jail. Yet, while folks may not be locked up, it does not mean they escape the gaze and grasp of the carceral state. Policies such as field booking arrests often entrap more folks within the snares of the system than if no such policy existed. Such implications and consequences warrant closer attention. We hope this analysis inspires such efforts, as we are all responsible for minimizing harm, particularly for the most vulnerable.

Notes

¹ All monetary amounts are in US dollars.

² In the present work, “Latine” refers to those who classify themselves as a person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Central American, South American, or other Spanish cultural origin. See Ochoa (2022) for a discussion of the use of this inclusive terminology over “Latinx.”

³ Detailed information about the distribution by income, political leanings, education, and other factors may be found at <https://statisticalatlas.com/place/South-Carolina/Columbia/Race-and-Ethnicity> and <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/columbia-sc/>.

⁴ According to the National Conference of State Legislatures (2019), South Carolina permits field booking arrests for misdemeanor and felony offenses. Unfortunately, information about when and why the use of field booking arrests began in Columbia, SC, is unavailable to the best of the authors' knowledge. This information would have further contextualized the present work, but instead is an additional limitation.

⁵ Specific coding available upon request.

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