

## APA Official Actions

# Position Statement on Police Interactions with Children and Adolescents in Mental Health Crisis

Approved by the Board of Trustees, July 2022

Approved by the Assembly, May 2022

“Policy documents are approved by the APA Assembly and Board of Trustees. . . These are . . . position statements that define APA official policy on specific subjects. . .” – *APA Operations Manual*

### Issue:

The safety and protection of children and adolescents against undue police force is a national concern. Police contact with youth is frequent and often characterized as challenging. As police often respond first to crises, youth with mental illness may be inappropriately diverted to the youth legal system rather than towards treatment.

Children and adolescents are less able to anticipate consequences and to self-regulate their emotions as compared to adults. As the level of resistance increases, officers use higher levels of force to gain compliance. Black children are six times, and Hispanic children three times more likely to be shot to death by police than white children. The police use of force against children and adolescents who are acting in developmentally appropriate ways can lead to acute distress, which can be harmful to a child's ability to cope and may lead to a cascade of psychological sequelae. This may include the development or worsening of mental illness and can end in traumatization, serious injury, lower educational attainment and future employment, or death.

### APA Position:

**APA calls for national standards that protect children and adolescents against violence by law enforcement responding to youth in mental health crisis, including support for:**

- 1. Health care and mental health workers as first responders to non-criminal calls such as mental health crises, wellness checks, and non-violent domestic disputes.**
- 2. Limits to use of force against children including placing handcuffs on children when responding to non-criminal calls such as mental health crises, wellness checks, and non-violent domestic disputes.**
- 3. Mandatory training for law enforcement personnel who respond to and/ or interact with youth in mental health crisis on effective developmentally appropriate communication that emphasizes de-escalation techniques and non-punitive trauma-informed interventions.**
- 4. Resource allocation to historically underfunded and underserved communities to break the cycle of poverty and criminalization of racial minority children and adolescents.**

**Authors:** Suzan J. Song, MD; Balkozar Adam, MD; Latoya Frolov, MD; Tresha Gibbs, MD

**Collaborators:** Council on Children, Adolescents, and Their Families