

# Urban Unrest: Crime Control in American Cities and the Sociological Implications of Police Strategy

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Dating back to the initial days of urbanization in the United States, the impact of crime and delinquency on cities has differed vastly from the impact on suburban and rural spaces. While a number of factors are believed by criminologists to precipitate such urban violence, primary justifications for policing's altered approach to cities include curbing poverty, lowering unemployment and working towards neighborhood revitalization. A wide array of crime control strategies have targeted the unique sources of anti-social behaviors that plague city neighborhoods, including targeted patrols and other forms of policing that focus on particular offenses or offender groups. While criminological research has revealed that some of these programs have been successful in reducing levels of urban delinquency, the strategies have undoubtedly resulted in a range of far-reaching sociological implications. Through a review of prior literature, this paper will explore a range of crime control strategies which have been employed in American cities over time, as well as to assess the various impacts they have had on urbanites – including those who have been disproportionately impacted by some strategies. This paper will also offer a discussion related to the role policymakers have in this regard – and the importance of considering the sociological implications in crafting future urban crime policy.

## **The troubling state of American cities**

In a 2007 article, historian Michael Katz discusses the then-forty-year anniversary of the infamous riots that plagued Newark, New Jersey and Detroit, Michigan. Katz uses the anniversary as an opportunity to explore the conditions – income inequality, unemployment, failing schools, poverty, policing practices and general urban decay – that precipitated the riots and the widespread urban unrest at that time, as well as to explore the condition of cities four decades following the tipping point that landed the devastating and deep-seated urban troubles at the forefront of news coverage and policy debates (Katz, 2007). After posing a thought-provoking question – “why aren't U.S. cities burning?” – in the very title of his article, Katz offers not an answer, but a response: “the question is puzzling because many of the

conditions thought to have precipitated the eruption of violence in the 1960s either persist or have grown worse” (2007, p. 23). He further expresses a sense of puzzlement that more cities were not in a state of disarray and disorder at the time of his writing, given the grave inequities facing urban spaces.

In the wake of recent unrest in Baltimore, New York City and Ferguson, Missouri, as well as several other cities throughout the country, Katz might be inclined to revisit his

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2007 response. Whether triggered by fatal police shootings or emanating from a more general sense of frustration and discontent with government, sometimes violent unrest has plagued American cities as of late. Amidst protests, the emergence of movements like “Black Lives Matter” have sought to organize voices and communities around the need to advocate for African-American populations, and predominately in urban settings (Garza, 2014). According to the movement’s website, “Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are systematically and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of Black folks’ contributions to this society, our humanity, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression” (Garza, 2014). The coalition and those who identify with its message and objectives have mobilized in recent months – predominately following instances of alleged abuse of power by law enforcement officials or in the wake of police-involved shootings or violence. However, the very existence of such a coalition represents something much broader than any single event (Garza, 2014). Social advocacy emanating from unrest has been described as representative of a deep-seated discontent with government, as well as a perceived lack of equity and justice amongst a substantial subset of the American population.

### **The urban context**

In examining the present state of American cities and the unrest that has plagued several urban centers in recent years, it is useful to first discuss the unique characteristics of cities that set them apart from other spatial arrangements. More than half of the world’s population resides in cities across the globe, adding gravity to studies related to urban affairs (Glaeser, 2011). Scholars seeking to understand how and why cities have formed have often identified fixed attributes – whether a port or industry – as resulting in the formation of such communities (Glaeser, 2011). These agglomerations of population, capital and enterprise, however, have carried with them a range of threats and dangers unique to such spatial concentrations, with disease, crime and congestion being prominent urban plagues identified throughout history (Glaeser, 2011). In fact, the challenges associated with the rise of urbanism in the United States have, at one time or another, attracted what some have described as “unprecedented professional, political, and bureaucratic attention” (Barnes, 2005, p. 580). From education to law enforcement, community development to infrastructure improvements and enhancements, cities have historically presented policymakers with a wide range of needs and concerns (Barnes, 2005).

Over time, urban theory has evolved to encompass a wide range of perspectives on the nature of cities and how they function – or, in some cases, how they can cease to function. Scott and Storper (2014) make the argument that “cities are so big, so complicated and so lacking in easily identifiable boundaries that any attempt to define their essential characteristics is doomed to failure” (p. 1). Scholarly attention to cities has increased, focusing in part on the unique attributes that make understanding such physical, political and social constructs challenging (Scott & Storper, 2014). Cities are depicted in scholarly literature as everything from sources of economic development to cultural centers, regional hubs of commerce and government to gateways to international trade and facilitators of globalization (Scott & Storper, 2014; Barnes, 2005; Pierre, 2011). Yet another view of cities – and perhaps one that is most appropriate for the broader scope of the present discussion – is that of “the city as a theater of class struggle, centered on land markets as machines for distributing wealth upward and on associated political claims from below about citizenship rights to urban space and resources” (Scott & Storper, 2014, p. 2). It is this lens through which scholars can examine and evaluate the recent unrest plaguing American cities.

This paper seeks to examine one of the most pressing challenges confronting urban residents and leaders alike: public safety. At once a political lightning rod and the subject of desperate pleas for assistance and intervention from among many subsets of the urban community, crime frequently

dominates the urban discourse in America. This paper will feature an analysis of prior literature – namely through exploring policing strategies and policies which have received among the most attention in criminological literature. It will continue with an assessment of literature which has tracked the sociological implications of these strategies – impacts which have been highlighted in recent months and years in the wake of several pronounced demonstrations of unrest and discontent. This scholarly examination finally will seek to make the argument that policymakers should take into consideration the vast and far-reaching sociological implications that accompany urban crime control measures, and that have come with such strategies for many decades. While combating criminality in urban spaces presents public leaders with a range of challenges, their responses to those barriers carry the potential of contributing to broader sociological constructs that might very well prove to be more destructive than the crime they seek to prevent; this argument will be addressed in the review of prior scholarship that follows, as well as in the discussion of the resulting policy implications.

### **Crime in American cities**

Criminologists researching delinquency and means of governmental social control have developed a growing body of theory related to the commission of criminal acts, in part focusing on the conditions under which one is most likely to perceive crime as a justifiable risk in an attempt to better one's position or achieve some other end (Roncek, 1981). Among the situational factors taken into consideration by would-be criminal actors are the likelihood of detection and the probability of apprehension by law enforcement, factors that can change vastly from one neighborhood or block to the next (Roncek, 1981). Such discussions are common among those investigating American cities, and in particular, the unique impact of such delinquent activity on residents of cities. In the field of urban sociology, inquiries into the relationship between crime and city life are critical (Roncek, 1981). Research has investigated both the prevalence of criminal activity in cities compared to that in rural or suburban locales, as well as the conditions within urban areas that are believed to foster criminality among both residents and outsiders (Roncek, 1981). Urban sociologists advocate for the position that cities are more “structured organizations of people and environments” than the result of the happenstance – a reality which undoubtedly permeates each layer of the social fabric of such spaces (Roncek, 1981, p. 76). It is this theory, criminologists assert, that allows for the differential levels of crime in particular urban neighborhoods (Roncek, 1981). And the environmental qualities – physical and spatial attributes and arrangements – of urban spaces in America can, in a sense, cultivate locations prime for such criminality (Roncek, 1981).

### ***Fear of crime***

Central to research on crime in American cities is the element of fear that is associated with urban living (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). For many city residents, researchers have found, fear can be almost a daily struggle associated with an urban lifestyle (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). While fear is at once both personal and social, it can also have a strong impact on the social organization of the broader community, reaching almost to a societal level in terms of its impact on collections of individuals (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). Some levels of fear can be linked to rumor and the development of reputations associated with particular places – such as neighborhoods, blocks or city wards – and evident in both subsequent observations and experiences in such places (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). Considerations of the concept of crime and its relation to fear are complicated by the understanding and conceptualization of crime possessed by many individuals and families, particularly those who reside in cities (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001).

Crime is a relatively ambiguous term. Research has found a wide range of associations to the concept – reactions that depend in large part on the experiences of individuals and those with whom they are in contact (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). Anecdotes and stories about particular crimes permeate discussions among urban residents, giving way to confusion, uncertainty and apprehension for future personal and collective community safety (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001). Concerns are often flamed by the relatively negative frame the news media paints of urban spaces, particularly when focusing on stories about crime, delinquency and public safety – a large focus of news content related to American cities (Dreier, 2005). Such sociological reactions to dialogues about urban crime eliminate the possibility of dispassionate analyses of the actual prevalence of delinquency, giving way to the exaggerated levels of fear that exist within cities (Sparks, Girling & Loader, 2001).

According to Schweitzer, Kim and Mackin (1999), the fear of crime identified among city dwellers “may have more effect on some urban residents than actual crime” (p. 59). The development of psychological stresses and the cultivation of fear of one’s surrounding environment can lead some urban residents to confine themselves in their homes, their freedom inhibited similar to that of prisoners (Schweitzer, Kim and Mackin, 1999). The authors go so far as to suggest that high levels of fear associated with criminality and delinquency can be as traumatizing and impactful as witnessing a criminal act, or even being the victim of a crime (Schweitzer, Kim and Mackin, 1999). Levels of fear are related in part to the sense of community felt by residents in particular neighborhoods. The absence of such social organization – as well as relationships with youth in the community – has been identified as a contributing factor to this anxiety (Schweitzer, Kim and Mackin, 1999). Such fear also tends to be more intense in neighborhoods with higher levels of racial segregation, supporting the theory of the role of community cohesiveness in predicting social disorder (Krivo, Peterson & Kuhl, 2009). Aside from community closeness and interpersonal relationships, research has identified the presence of nearby merchants and crime watch signs as factors contributing to higher levels of fear within urban communities (Krivo, Peterson & Kuhl, 2009). Regardless of the source of such fear, it has been argued that the presence of any level of fear related to crime makes more of a difference in terms of urban quality of life than the degree to which one perceives the threat of crime as real or likely (Pain, 2001).

### ***Impacts of urban crime***

Research on the ever-present fear of crime in cities has also led to increased inquiry into the greater impacts of delinquency on daily life in urban spaces across America. According to Krivo and Peterson (1996), urban neighborhoods that are considered “extremely disadvantaged” are characterized by higher rates of criminal activity (p. 620). This could relate to the presence of factors that allow for a prime environment for delinquency, equated primarily with the low anticipation of police intervention and apprehension (Krivo and Peterson, 1996). Such neighborhoods, in addition to being magnets for at least some degree of criminality, are also characterized “by a high degree of social isolation from mainstream society” (Krivo and Peterson, 1996, p. 619). Whether this is a result of crime itself or factors that allow for it to grow more prevalent could perhaps be a matter of debate, but either theory gives way to a broader deterioration of neighborhood conditions (Krivo and Peterson, 1996). Kaslow (1973) attributes some urban crime patterns to the lack of economic opportunity found in many cities, connecting to criminological theories of anomie and strain as causes of delinquency among inhabitants. These negative factors can contribute in part to what is described as a “delinquent subculture,” fostering an environment ripe for offending (Kaslow, 1973, p. 29).

It is also worth exploring the effects of crime patterns on various aspects of urban life outside of the aforementioned fear paradigm. Rising rates of criminal activity in particular neighborhoods can result in changes in the demand for housing in such locales (Naroff, Hellman & Skinner, 1980).

Such trends of flight from, or avoidance of, particular neighborhoods can impact property values for remaining residents and pave the way for hikes in property taxes – a major source of revenue for American cities (Naroff, Hellman & Skinner, 1980). At the same time, disinvestment in urban communities stemming from individual responses to crime patterns can result in budgetary constraints for city governments that could, ironically, inhibit the ability of police departments to effectively control crime (Naroff, Hellman & Skinner, 1980). Reduction in crime rates can provide additional property tax revenue for city governments, and can lead to the reinvestment in communities by both individuals and businesses (Naroff, Hellman & Skinner, 1980).

It is important to note that urban crime patterns have historically extended to surrounding suburban neighborhoods, which eventually experience some of the same quality of life challenges and financial pressures faced by cities (Stahura & Sloan, 1988). Traffic congestion, poverty, deterioration of available housing quality and even unemployment, coupled with the broader issue of crime and community disinvestment, have begun to invade suburban regions surrounding city centers (Stahura & Sloan, 1988). Such factors in cities are considered by criminologists to be motivators for criminal activity, and extensions of these phenomena to suburbs tend to mark the advent of crime spikes in the same locales (Stahura & Sloan, 1988). This is also seen through the participation of suburbanites in city crime, or the victimization of suburban residents by urban-based offenders (Shihadeh & Ousey, 1996). Such occurrences point to the lack of spatial containment of urban crime in America, a further cause for the attention paid to the issue by both public officials and law enforcement leaders.

### ***Law enforcement responses to fear of crime***

The unique challenges facing urban spaces related to crime and criminality and the widely prevalent fear among urban residents leads to an analysis of the response of law enforcement to crime in cities. Growing levels of fear related to perceived and actual crime in urban spaces has in recent years drawn an increased amount of attention from law enforcement agencies seeking to improve the quality of life for city dwellers (Silverman & Della-Giustina, 2001). In the context of the role of social capital in curbing delinquency and eliminating the fear of future criminality, Walklate (2001) identified the disintegration of community social networks as one impetus for crime control in urban spaces. Researchers have asserted that considerations on the part of public officials and police agencies must include views of criminal activity expressed by urbanites rooted in personal experiences (Walklate, 2001). Fear of crime within communities can lead to adjustments in official policing policy in reaction to such offenses or offense patterns, particularly when police leaders begin to view containment and mitigation of community fear as a priority (Silverman & Della-Giustina, 2001). An awareness of the nature and extent of such fear is necessary for effective intervention by law enforcement professionals, whose impressions are typically guided, at least in part, by experiences and interactions with the communities they serve (Silverman & Della-Giustina, 2001).

Fighting crime that touches urban areas has historically been a focus of policing in America (Bayley, 1998). One of the primary goals set for law enforcement is the curbing of “group violence,” which research indicates poses more of a threat to cities than suburbs or rural regions (Bayley, 1998, p. 18). Research also suggests that the presence of complicated social networks in cities facilitate the rapid transmission of information on events, including criminal acts or threats to public safety, and exert pressures on police to react (Body-Gendrot, 2001). Political pressures for crime control from various sources – including citizens, interest groups, businesses and others – as a means for maintaining existing investments in communities and promoting further support also place the burden of urban policing at the forefront for city officials and police leaders (Body-Gendrot, 2001). Further, the argument has been made that crime control can become a means for promoting the

initial stages of urban renewal and revitalization (Lehrer, 2000). When crime rates fall, researchers purport, new businesses open, streets are considered safe at night and more individuals and families live in urban spaces or invest in communities through purchases and the patronage of businesses – contributing to an overall sense of improvement in urban spaces (Lehrer, 2000). It is this collection of arguments supporting the need for urban crime control, in part, which has spurred American law enforcement agencies to implement a unique set of strategies in the nation's cities.

### **Urban crime control strategies**

Since the initial days of urbanization in America, communities have struggled to maintain a sense of power or control over their neighborhood spaces (Beecher, Lineberry & Rich, 1981). The issue agendas topping the minds of community activists and residents can vary greatly by block or neighborhood, but research has identified urban crime as an issue paramount for many individuals as well as associations (Beecher, Lineberry & Rich, 1981). Scholars have linked the pursuit of regaining community power with the desire to rid city neighborhoods of crime, particularly when linked to urban renewal goals and initiatives (Beecher, Lineberry & Rich, 1981). Hence, cities have employed a variety of crime control strategies in order to enhance public safety and help launch revitalization efforts. Such efforts have traditionally been rooted, according to Tilley and Laycock (2000), in theory related to the wickedness of crime that posits commonly held beliefs about crime and draws from social research:

There appears to be a strong inclination to approach crime in ideological terms. Crime is wicked so some wickedness must be rooted out to deal with it. Individuals must be blamed, or defective social arrangements must be held responsible. Social scientific research is generally more concerned with explanation than judgment, and is more likely to suggest a clinical approach to reducing crime (p. 215).

Cities have historically employed a variety of tactics to combat crime, with some resting upon research-based policy suggestions, and others closely aligned with politically favorable options (Tilley and Laycock, 2000).

### ***Traditional methods and untraditional experiments***

Historically, the patrol component of any American police department has been responsible for delivering the bulk of police services to the public (Walker & Katz, 2008). Marked patrol vehicles and uniformed police officers serve as the most visible representation of law enforcement agencies, which, on average, assign a majority of sworn personnel, to such patrol duties (Walker & Katz, 2008). On a daily basis, patrol officers respond to calls for service as well as initiate investigations based upon observations made in the field, and are typically the individuals who come into the most contact with the population they serve (Walker & Katz, 2008). The basic goals of patrol divisions and platoons revolve around deterring crime, enhancing a sense of public safety in their respective communities, and ensuring that officers are available for service when needed (Walker & Katz, 2008). Research related to the deployment of police officers suggests the use of random patrol patterns, rapid response to calls for service from the community and intensive arrest and enforcement procedures and policies as means for improving effectiveness (Walker & Katz, 2008). Such studies have also suggested that increasing the size of police departments by adding sworn officers helps to increase the efficacy of departmental operations (Walker & Katz, 2008). However, while putting more officers on the streets might lessen response times and improve the responsiveness of police agencies, further research related to urban policing asserts that simply

increasing patrols is not an effective means for true urban crime prevention (Tilley and Laycock, 2000).

Thus, more unique strategies than simply hiring more police officers have been strategically employed in the greater effort to curb urban disorder across the country. One such initiative was undertaken beginning in 1992 in Kansas City, Missouri, where a single patrol beat had devolved into one of the most dangerous areas in the country (Walker & Katz, 2008). As part of the later-dubbed “Kansas City Gun Experiment,” police began to focus resources on the neighborhood with a homicide rate twenty times higher than the national average (Walker & Katz, 2008). Such an area, commonly referred to as a *hot spot*, a space with a disproportionately high crime rate or rate of calls for service from residents and others (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 205). The 29-week experimental period in Kansas City resulted in a halved rate of overall gun crimes and a 67 percent drop in the homicide rate for the targeted area (Walker & Katz, 2008). While other criminal acts and calls for service were not impacted as heavily – in some cases, not at all – the experiment provided support for the theory of policing strategies targeted towards specific offenses as being successful (Walker & Katz, 2008). A 1989 study of over 300,000 calls to police officials in Minneapolis, Minnesota found that three percent of addresses accounted for 50 percent of all calls for which police were dispatched (Sherman et al., 1989). Similar statistics have been cited by various researchers as evidence of differential consumption of police services among particular populations and locales (Walker & Katz, 2008). Traditional patrol strategies were further tested through the Kansas City Preventative Patrol Experiment, conducted in 1972 (Walker & Katz, 2008). The department, for the first time, adjusted levels of police patrols in particular neighborhoods, deploying additional personnel to areas with higher crime rates, and experiencing subsequent success in lowering rates in those specific areas (Walker & Katz, 2008). In part, the experiment provided support for the line of thinking that simply adding patrols to certain areas without an altered focus or a particular emphasis on preventing certain offenses had no net impact on crime or feelings of safety among residents (Walker & Katz, 2008).

Such research and experiments point to the need, many argue, for more creative policing strategies, particularly in urban spaces in America (Walker & Katz, 2008). Whether it is a form of hot-spot patrolling or using specialized units to target specific offenses or offender groups, criminologists have offered support for less traditional approaches (Walker & Katz, 2008). One such attempt was made in Minneapolis, when police units would crack down on quality of life and nuisance violations, as well as more serious offenses, in particular neighborhoods for short periods of time to instill a sense of “residual deterrence” among residents (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 229-230). The measure was expected to lead to residents being more fearful of committing crimes based upon the heightened expectation of police detection and intervention (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 229-230). More proactive policing strategies based upon community initiatives and targeted towards improving the relationship between police and the populations they serve, are considered more effective than the historic plans of police agencies to merely increase the size of departments (Walker & Katz, 2008).

### ***Successes in combating urban crime***

Scholars of urban studies have also identified examples of successful crime control mechanisms in particular cities. In New York City, for example, a study analyzing crime rates and police activity identified several trends related to law enforcement productivity and public safety (Corman & Joyce, 1990). Taking into consideration the decision of a criminal to commit an act, the funding of public safety by government officials and the provision of police services to respond and investigate particular acts, the study found that, over time, higher arrest rates coincided with lower crime rates, pointing to the deterrent effect of intensive arrest policies (Corman & Joyce, 1990). In

addition, higher crime rates were connected with lower police productivity when considering workload and effectiveness (Corman & Joyce, 1990). In the analysis, crimes of passion and other relatively unpredictable acts that would not likely be impacted by general deterrence in particular neighborhoods were excluded from the study's findings (Corman & Joyce, 1990). Thus, according to the study's results, increasing levels of arrest can lead to lower levels of urban crime.

A more out-of-the-box strategy to curbing urban disorder was employed in Los Angeles, California, when Police Chief William Bratton identified five high-crime sections of the city and launched targeted efforts to "reclaim" public places in those areas (Sousa & Kelling, 2009, p. 41). One of the areas selected in the "Safer Cities" initiative was MacArthur Park, a 40-acre public space near the city's downtown region and within the department's Rampart Division (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). The historically beautiful park, by the early 2000s, was considered to be "lost to the criminal element" (Sousa & Kelling, 2009, p. 42). Four gangs took over control of different portions of the park; drugs were dealt in public; graffiti permeated the space; prostitution was rampant, particularly in restroom facilities; and an overall sense of the loss of control of the park colored experiences and observations in the park (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). The Alvarado Corridor Initiative, within the larger "Safer Cities" program, adopted a hard line approach against the quality of life issues facing the park which had resulted in the space becoming essentially inaccessible to many members of the public despite its public nature and support (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). Additional officers were added to the patrol beat; all offenses were prosecuted, despite the relatively minor nature of some misdemeanors; special and undercover units were deployed to supplement uniformed operations and patrols; television monitoring systems were implemented; additional signs were posted announcing the rules of the park; and maintenance personnel from the city worked to better maintain the aesthetics of the area (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). Public offices and agencies also enhanced programming in the park, including the scheduling of concerts and outdoor events, to help draw residents to the space (Sousa & Kelling, 2009).

The LAPD's approach to reclaiming MacArthur Park as a public space was posited on the principles of community policing, defensible space and crime prevention (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). While data released at the time of the study's conclusion was still relatively scarce, it was concluded that the crime rates of many offenses within the park dropped with the implementation of the tactics of police officials assigned there (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). Adding police resources to the park, joined by cooperation from other public agencies, seemed to result in a greater sense of empowerment among police leaders and beat officers alike, as the once out-of-control space was slowly transformed back into a welcoming park that could again fulfill its promises to residents as a community resource (Sousa & Kelling, 2009). On the other hand, this case is also referenced as an example of a community's ability to regain ownership over particular urban landscapes, and to restore a sense of pride among a community in the maintenance and upkeep of the public space (Sousa & Kelling, 2009).

Elements of community policing identified in the LAPD's Alvarado Corridor Initiative can be linked to a broader body of research backing the effectiveness of such outreach initiatives by law enforcement agencies in American cities (Saunders, 1999). Community policing captures elements of partnership, crime prevention and problem-solving techniques that aim to mobilize available community resources around the goals of law enforcement agencies (Saunders, 1999). While such strategies have been criticized as merely a response to negative publicity following poor encounters between police and members of the communities they serve, the strategies have been found effective in some cases (Saunders, 1999). The sense of ownership that develops from such partnership-oriented initiatives can result in joined efforts between police and members of the public to prevent crime, with residents reporting observations of criminal acts or suspicious activities (Saunders, 1999). Police responses to such tips can lead to improved relationships between the two



parties, and contribute to the further sharing of observations from residents with law enforcement (Saunders, 1999). Ideally, such developments could improve, in general, the favorable view of police agencies and the team approach to crime prevention (Saunders, 1999).

### **Sociological implications of urban crime control**

Crime control measures in American cities, including those that have realized seemingly positive, crime-reduction successes, have become the subject of voluminous research related to the ensuing deterioration of police-community relations, and the further sociological implications for urbanites. Taking into consideration even the basic behavior patterns of law enforcement officers in urban centers, researchers and practitioners alike have identified a “quasi-military” approach that has been met with heavy criticism (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 93). From the type of uniform worn to the ranking systems akin to those in the military, officers are increasingly being perceived as members of the armed services (Walker & Katz, 2008). Police officers differ from military troops in a number of ways, ranging from the peacekeeping functions to the goal of providing service to a community rather than to achieve ends related to wartime or a foreign enemy (Walker & Katz, 2008). The element of discretion exercised by police also draws distinctions with military command structures and protocol (Walker & Katz, 2008). In a lengthy volume on the topic, Radley Balko (2013) writes:

Police today are armed, dressed, trained, and conditioned like soldiers. They’re given greater protections from civil and criminal liability than normal citizens. They’re permitted to violently break into homes, often at night, to enforce laws against nonviolent, consensual-acts – and even then, often on rather flimsy evidence of wrongdoing. Negligence and errors in judgment that result in needless terror, injury, and death are rarely held accountable. Citizens who make similar errors under the same circumstances almost always face criminal charges, usually felonies (p. 334).

While a portion of Balko’s argument rests on research and discussions related to law enforcement’s role in the nation’s War on Drugs, the point regarding the military-style approach of America’s police forces extends beyond drug raids and seizures, permeating even the most basic of emergency responses or neighborhood patrols (Balko, 2013).

### ***‘Us vs. Them’ approach to urban policing***

It has been argued that this very basic set of attitudes and characteristics function to delegitimize the traditional authority and responsibilities of police agencies, fostering an “us versus them” attitude that can in some instances be “used to justify mistreatment of citizens” (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 93). The law enforcement approach is also criticized for displaying a “war on crime” demeanor that many describe as inappropriate given the duties to serve civilian populations – resulting in growing levels of disconnect between officers and the citizens they serve (Walker & Katz, 2008, p. 93-94). Some departments in past decades have experimented with shifting to different types of uniforms without ranking structures to emphasize the differences between officers and troops, but such efforts were short-lived, owing to identification issues in the community and the absence of a guiding rank structure that has become so prevalent in police agencies (Walker & Katz, 2008).

Researchers analyzing the impact of aggressive policing practices in particular neighborhoods in New York City identified a link to perceptions of police legitimacy connected to such practices:

Citizen perceptions of law enforcement are relevant to how the public views specific police practices; when people perceive that the police are targeting them without cause, the authority

of the police is delegitimized, but when people believe they are being treated fairly, they are more likely to believe that police actions are justifiable (Lachmen, La Vigne & Matthews, 2012, p. 6).

Part of the challenge for law enforcement agencies seeking to uphold a positive reputation and presence in urban neighborhoods is the pattern under which young people are introduced to the criminal justice system (Shedd, 2012). Many youths first interact with the police and the larger justice system without facing a single charge, but rather being the subject of targeted police practices (Shedd, 2012). According to Shedd (2012), “as neighborhoods and schools have become more scrutinized during the current era of mass incarceration, some youth end up on a ‘carceral continuum,’ in which supervision and surveillance exist at varying levels of severity” (p. 26).

It is also important to consider the distribution of policing strategies and the ensuing effects on views of police legitimacy. Scholars point to empirical evidence when arguing that the impact of the criminal justice system is “neither evenly nor randomly distributed across people or places,” a factor that can greatly aggravate already tense police-community relations (Shedd, 2012, p. 26). Research involving young urban residents found that certain policing policies, such as “stop and frisk” and other strategies employed in predominately urban contexts, “tend to reduce compliance and voluntary cooperation with law enforcement” (Tyler & Fagan, 2012, p. 30). As individual opinions about law enforcement can come from a variety of factors, it is often difficult to isolate whether a positive or negative outlook could be more directly derived from the experiences of a friend or loved one, or perhaps a personal encounter with an officer (Tyler & Fagan, 2012). However, personal interactions have been found to play a significant role in shaping such perceptions, and scholars suggest that sweeps or arrest campaigns that target minority youth – even for offenses as minor as loitering – can have significantly negative impacts on police-community relations, and ultimately, the greater goals of combating urban crime (Tyler & Fagan, 2012). Such patterns – both perceived and supported by empirical data about discrepancies in police action across communities or with reference to particular types of individuals – can also result in greater suspicion of police misconduct (Miller & Davis, 2007).

### ***Impacts of racial and ethnic disparities in police action***

Minority populations living in urban communities in America have been shown, through empirical evidence, “to be the disproportionate recipients of both proactive policing strategies and various forms of police misconduct” (Brunson & Miller, 2005, p. 613). Research examining behavior patterns related to policing in disadvantaged urban areas has found that more aggressive actions on the part of law enforcement officers are typically met with less cooperation or compliance (Brunson & Miller, 2005). An analysis of population figures suggests that negative police actions, including disrespect, disproportionately impact black people in comparison to other population groups (Brunson & Miller, 2005). It is this growing body of research that suggests that the “consistent finding of minority distrust and dissatisfaction with the police can best be understood with reference to the nature of policing in their communities, including their interpretations of their own experiences with the police” (Brunson & Miller, 2005, p. 614). Neighborhoods described or known as “dangerous” tend to be inhabited primarily by minority individuals and families, as are the *hot spots* patrolled or targeted most frequently by urban police forces (Brunson & Miller, 2005). The patrol officers who work in such neighborhoods, some researchers have argued, tend to view minorities as being more predisposed to criminal tendencies than non-minority counterparts (Brunson & Miller, 2005). A prior study involving interviews with young black men living in urban spaces resulted in a series of observations many held with regards to the police (Brunson & Miller, 2005). Most of the negative accounts related by young men involved being “hassled” by police officers, when most

instances resulted in no formal charges or judicial action (Brunson & Miller, 2005, p. 623). The study's authors contend that most negative perceptions of police among the group analyzed resulted from proactive policing strategies – including vehicle and pedestrian stops – and other instances in which it was perceived that police were engaging in a confrontation with the subjects without sufficient cause or suspicion (Brunson & Miller, 2005). The phrase “just messin’ with us” captures the opinions of many of the young men in regards to the interactions prompted by police in their neighborhoods (Brunson & Miller, 2005, p. 623-624).

Such opinions can also be generalized to include entire urban minority populations, inclusive of both juveniles and adults (Weitzer, Tuch & Skogan, 2008). Research on both statistics and political factors indicates that “race is the most important fault line along which Americans divide over policing,” with three decades of research on police-citizen encounters and assessment of law enforcement agencies, documenting disparities related to race and ethnicity (Weitzer, Tuch & Skogan, 2008, p. 401). These tensions can be traced through history in accounts of the relationship between police and black communities in Philadelphia, particularly in the period between 1945 and 1960 (Johnson, 2004). A significant part of the twentieth century was characterized by clashes between the two factions, with some incidents turning violent (Johnson, 2004). Police in the city have been criticized for using incarceration “as a means of urban social control,” with high levels of arrests compounded by accusations of excessive force and brutality (Johnson, 2004, p. 131). Investigations and studies into the tumultuous period identified police brutality and other alleged misconduct as the chief cause for widespread urban rioting in Philadelphia, as well as in other cities wrought with such violence and disorder (Johnson, 2004).

The disparities in police-community relations based upon race and ethnicity are evident in the results of a study interviewing young people in an urban space on the topic of law enforcement and community perceptions of the police (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). Brunson and Weitzer found that interviews with white youth yielded more positive views of the police than those with black youth, with the former group reporting more positive encounters with law enforcement than the latter (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). In addition, police treatment of residents in predominantly white neighborhoods appeared to be less problematic than that in predominantly black neighborhoods, with racially and ethnically mixed areas falling in between the two ends of the spectrum (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009). Instances of verbal abuse, alleged suspicionless stops and other forms of harassment were abundant among the black youth surveyed. One of the interviewees, Maurice, related:

[The police] assume you run the streets, steal cars, or smoke weed because you dress a certain way, like baggy pants or a long T-shirt and Nike brand shoes. They consider you as a gang member just because of what you were wearing or how you talk (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009, p. 868).

Further disparities in police conduct in particular urban neighborhoods were identified by the researchers in relation to overall police services and response time, which was perceived by black respondents to be better for predominantly white neighborhoods in comparison to their own (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009).

### **Implications for policymakers**

In his book on the militarization of America's police forces, author Radley Balko presents a range of policies which he argues would have to be enacted for significant change to be realized (Balko, 2013). The last need he presents revolves around the public: he writes, “the most difficult change is the one that's probably necessary to make any of these others happen. The public needs to start caring about these issues” (Balko, 2013, p. 331). He goes on to express optimism related to the

growing attention being paid to law enforcement activity and the strategies police employ across the country, but posits that "...while exposing individual incidents of misconduct is important, particularly to the victim of the misconduct, it's more important to expose the policies that allow misconduct to flourish" (Balko, 2013, p. 332). The argument of this paper closely resembles Balko's point here: it is critical to examine the policies which allow for the various law enforcement strategies outlined in the preceding examination of prior research. And while public attention is a component of this need, it is critical that policymakers pay close attention to the sometimes-devastating consequences of these strategies.

Prior research indicates that tensions in urban spaces can result from the same proactive policing practices that are often justified as necessary to keep cities in America safe. Such tensions – resulting in part from racial and ethnic disparities in police action – can spark instances of civil disorder, particularly following a particularly high-profile event or altercation; at a minimum, those tensions can evolve to permeate the social fabric of a city and have a pronounced impact on quality of life and other factors. This phenomenon has received widespread media attention in recent months and years following several high-profile events. Sometimes extended periods of unrest, notably in Ferguson, Missouri and in Baltimore, have resulted not only in property damage, but also in personal injury both to civilians and law enforcement officials. While contextual, these instances point to a significant challenge confronting policymakers in America today: the preceding discussion illustrates the root causes of the political pressures that have dictated urban crime control and suppression strategies over time, but it also points to structural implications stemming from such law enforcement tactics. The sociological implications of some of these law enforcement strategies seem to perpetuate perceptions of inequity and foster sentiments of a lack of self-efficacy among substantial segments of America's urban population.

This paper points to the need for policymakers to pay careful attention to the deep-seated implications of some of the very same policing strategies that have been trumpeted as having played a pivotal role in reducing urban crime. In particular, the following elements of these implications are perhaps the most critical for policymakers to address, especially in light of recent unrest and the growing movement calling for law enforcement reform:

1. **Disproportionate impact of policing strategies based on race and ethnicity:** This represents what is arguably the most devastating effect of many of the police strategies outlined in this paper, and what could be seen as the most pressing concern for policymakers to address. Extensive data points to the disparate impact of these strategies for minority communities particularly in cities, as well as the resulting deleterious effect on police-community relations. Given the demographics of cities, this element is of utmost importance for urban policymakers – as has been demonstrated in cities like Baltimore and Ferguson in recent years.
2. **Militarization of police agencies:** Concerns related to the militarization of police departments also permeate discussions of crime control in American cities, though such an issue is hardly confined to urban geographic boundaries. The acquisition of military-style equipment and the transition over time to apparel that more closely resembles that of the armed forces has fueled arguments that police agencies foster a "war" mentality while on patrol.
3. **Deterioration of police-community relations and strained perceptions of police legitimacy:** Finally, the erosion of police-community relations in some locales, coupled with diminishing views of police legitimacy, have roots in both the abovementioned factors as well as others. That being said, the implications of this strained relationship have an even broader impact on the effectiveness of law enforcement, in part when it relates to

how citizens cooperate with, and provide information to, police about crimes that have taken place.

The agenda for elected officials and law enforcement leaders is, in reality, significantly longer than this, and could just as easily include addressing the War on Drugs or other significant policy initiatives (Balko, 2013). However, the three elements above are rooted in some of the most severe impacts of urban policing strategies. The preceding discussion points to the importance of considering these implications not only when crafting new law enforcement strategies, but also in addressing existing policies.

Policymakers are in a unique position to take these factors under consideration when devising policing plans and deployment strategies, as well as in discussions about programs and initiatives housed in law enforcement agencies. Recent events serve to underline the need for policymakers serving urban spaces to take a dual approach to crime, devising strategies that not only serve to curb criminality and enhance public safety, but also ensure that all populations are served equitably and in a fair, professional manner.

### **Conclusion**

American cities have historically been ground zero for a wide range of proactive law enforcement strategies as police seek to enhance public safety and combat the criminality that impacts urban populations in unique and significant ways. Justifications for aggressive practices can be derived from crime rates, as well as the links between neighborhood crime and other social issues that plague urbanites across the country. While some strategies take the form of modified patrol assignments or specialized units seeking to detect particular offenses or offenders, others constitute more aggressive, categorical sweeps of particular neighborhoods or criminal *hot spots* – initiatives that are among those that impact the greatest number of urbanites and seem to provoke significant public criticism and opposition. Crime control efforts are made more complex by the continuously emerging empirical and qualitative data, and research findings that showcase disparities in who is targeted by such policies. These patterns can result in a number of sociological implications for urban residents, particularly related to police-community relations and the perceptions of law enforcement among city populations. Such tensions, stemming from urban policing policy, can lead to instances of civil disorder, as well as a greater disconnect in wider efforts to curb criminality and enhance public safety in American cities. With such results likely to have long-term implications for American cities, policymakers are confronted with the challenge of understanding the sociological component of law enforcement strategy, and to better consider methods through which such negative implications can be mitigated while simultaneously enhancing public safety. And if recent events are any indication, this challenge will become more important in the months and years to come.

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