
Racialized Policing: Residents' Perceptions in Three Neighborhoods

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One of the most controversial issues in policing concerns allegations of racial bias. This article examines citizens' perceptions of racialized policing in three neighborhoods in Washington, D.C., that vary by racial composition and class position: a middle-class white community, a middle-class black community, and a lower-class black community. In-depth interviews examined residents' perceptions of differential police treatment of individual blacks and whites in Washington and disparate police practices in black and white neighborhoods. Findings indicate, first, that there is substantial agreement across the communities in the belief that police treat blacks and whites differently; and secondly, there is racial variation in respondents' explanations for racial disparities. On the question of residents' assessments of police relations with their own community relative to other-race communities, a neighborhood difference is found, with the black middle-class neighborhood standing apart from the other two neighborhoods.

An overwhelming majority of blacks and whites in America believe that the criminal justice system should operate in a race-neutral fashion and favor federal government intervention to ensure that minorities and whites receive equal treatment by the courts and police. Three-quarters of whites and 9 out of 10 blacks subscribed to this view in a recent poll (*Washington Post* 1995). But a person's support for the principle of equal justice does not mean that he or she believes the system actually dispenses unequal justice. Surveys consistently show, for example, that whites are less inclined than blacks to believe that police discriminate against minorities (Gallup 1997; Hagan & Albonetti 1982; Henderson et al. 1997; NBC News 1995; *Time* 1995; Weitzer & Tuch 1999). Blacks are more likely to believe that the police generally treat blacks more harshly than whites and that police racism and prejudice against blacks is common. At the neighborhood level,

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blacks are more likely than whites to believe that blacks living in the respondent's own community are treated unfairly by the police, and that black neighborhoods receive inferior treatment by the police. With respect to respondents' personal experiences of discrimination, blacks are much more likely than whites to report that they have been treated unfairly by police because of their race.

There may be more to the story, however, than racial differences. Large aggregate studies of public opinion may mask important differences within racial groups. One such variable is neighborhood context. A small body of research suggests that neighborhood-related factors can influence citizens' relations with police. Such factors include local crime rates, demographic composition, economic conditions, subculture, and patterns of policing (Alpert & Dunham 1988; Apple & O'Brien 1983; Jacob 1971; Klinger 1997; Sampson & Bartusch 1998; Schuman & Gruenberg 1972; Smith 1986; Weitzer 1995). The relative importance of these interrelated factors has not been determined, nor has the literature established whether neighborhood racial makeup or neighborhood class level is more strongly associated with residents' attitudes toward the police. It is commonly assumed, however, that *neighborhood racial composition* strongly conditions residents' relations with police. In this perspective, residents of white and black communities differ in their attitudes toward police largely because police practices vary between white and black neighborhoods. Because of police bias or other reasons, African American neighborhoods receive inferior treatment by police, which includes poorer service and harsher actions toward people in the community. Inferior treatment adversely affects views of the police in black neighborhoods.

An alternative perspective maintains that relationships with the police are conditioned less strongly by residents' racial backgrounds than by demands on law enforcement that vary by *neighborhood class level*. Because crime rates tend to be higher in both black and white lower-class communities than in middle-class areas (Krivo & Peterson 1996; Peeples & Loeber 1994), residents of lower-class areas have more contacts with police and, hence, a greater number of contacts that might go awry and result in conflict (Smith, Graham, & Adams 1991; Thomas & Hyman 1977). In terms of local crime and policing styles, then, black middle-class communities should have more in common with white middle-class communities than with disadvantaged black communities. Accordingly, residents of both black and white middle-class neighborhoods should have more favorable attitudes and experiences of the police than do their lower-class counterparts. Some support for this thesis is found in a recent study of 343 neighborhoods in Chicago, where neighborhood socioeconomic disadvantage explained apparent racial differences in satisfaction with po-

lice crime-control efforts; by implication, blacks living in more affluent areas held higher opinions of the police, although the authors do not discuss this segment of the population (Sampson & Bartusch 1998). Since the poor neighborhoods studied tended to be high-crime areas and since the questions were largely limited to police performance in controlling crime, it is not surprising that residents of these neighborhoods negatively evaluated the police. Had the study asked about other aspects of policing, such as misconduct or racial bias, this would have provided a stronger test of neighborhood–class influences on attitudes toward the police (see Weitzer 1999).

This article examines the question of whether neighborhood context makes a difference in perceptions of police discrimination. The focus is on a small number of neighborhood settings, which allows for a deeper and more contextualized understanding of police-citizen relations than is possible in large studies.

Methods

The data for this analysis were collected as part of a larger study of police-citizen relations in Washington, D.C. In-depth interviews were conducted in the years 1996–1997 with 169 residents of two predominantly African American neighborhoods and a predominantly white neighborhood. Census data from 1990 were used to identify tracts that differed in socioeconomic and racial profile. (Following standard practice, carefully selected census tracts were used as proxies for neighborhoods; though tracts rarely fit perfectly with socially defined neighborhoods, there may be a rough correspondence between the two, as is true for the present study sites.) Tracts in which more than 80% of the residents were white or more than 80% were black were ranked by median household income and grouped into quartiles. A white middle-class tract (“Cloverdale”) and a black middle-class tract (“Merrifield”) were selected from the top quartile and two adjacent black lower-class tracts were selected from the bottom quartile and combined to fit with approximate neighborhood boundaries of “Spartanburg” (neighborhood names are pseudonyms). Washington lacks lower-class white areas to compare to our sites, but interviews were conducted with a small number of white residents of the two black communities for limited comparisons to the other respondents. Most of the present analysis and all of the quotes, however, draw upon the majority respondents of the three neighborhoods; that is, whites in Cloverdale and blacks in Spartanburg and Merrifield.

Households were randomly selected from telephone directory lists of the selected census tracts.¹ Household residents were

¹ Sampling frames were created by Survey Sampling, Inc., of Fairfield, Connecticut.

contacted by letter and then by phone to explain the purpose of the study and to request permission to interview an individual at the residence; subjects were randomized by age (21 and over) and gender to increase representativeness. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers whose race was matched to respondents in order to facilitate rapport and minimize interviewer effects. Most of the interviews took place at residents' homes and offices; most lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours; and respondents received \$25 for participation.

Response rates were 59% in Cloverdale, 49% in Spartanburg, and 41% in Merrifield.² We interviewed 35 whites in Cloverdale, 58 blacks and 9 whites in Spartanburg, and 59 blacks and 8 whites in Merrifield. The three samples are generally representative of the census tracts from which they were drawn in terms of income and age; males are slightly underrepresented in all three samples; and, with respect to race, the Cloverdale sample is all white, but the ratio of blacks to whites in the Merrifield and Spartanburg samples is proportionate to the population. Comparing the three groups, respondents in Merrifield are slightly older than those in the other two neighborhoods (median age: Merrifield = 49, Cloverdale = 43, Spartanburg = 38), and the samples are similar in gender makeup (males: Merrifield = 37%, Cloverdale = 46%, Spartanburg = 39%).

The questionnaire contained both closed- and open-ended questions. The former permitted a modest quantitative analysis of answers; responses to the open-ended items were analyzed by coding and identifying themes in subjects' attitudes, observations, and reported experiences regarding the police. Coding and analysis were performed by the author and a research assistant using the Atlas/ti software program, which facilitated coding of a large qualitative dataset. In addition to interviews, the study also included a limited number of field observations of police interactions with citizens at monthly community meetings and during ride-alongs with police in the neighborhoods. The observational data were used to supplement the interview data.

The City and the Neighborhoods

Washington, D.C., is a majority-black city (66% black) whose police department has the highest percentage of black officers (69%) of any city in the country (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999a). The department has been run by black chiefs for almost the entire period since 1977. The composition and leadership of

² Refusals were influenced in part by the sensitive subject matter. The study was described in both initial letters and subsequent phone calls as research on "citizens' attitudes to the police in Washington." One explanation for the lower response rate in Merrifield was the fair number of elderly residents we contacted, some of whom declined to participate because they were ill.

the department thus differ from many other cities where white officers constitute the majority of the department and where white chiefs are at the helm.

Like other cities, Washington's Metropolitan Police Department has had its share of problems over the past decade. The problems have more to do with poor training, mismanagement, and scarce resources than with institutionalized corruption, racism, or brutality (Human Rights Watch 1998; Kappeler, Sluder, & Alpert 1998). Unlike some other cities, Washington has seen no recent incidents of police brutality of the magnitude of Rodney King, Abner Louima, Amadou Diallo, or Malice Green. However, in the 1990s the city registered the highest rate of fatal shootings by police of any large city in the country (Leen et al. 1998). It is not known how many of those killings were unjustified, but the Justice Department has begun a review of the shootings.

The only recent data on citizens' attitudes toward the police in Washington come from general questions. The city's police officers were rated excellent or good on their honesty and integrity by 53% of whites and 45% of blacks (*Washington Post* 1993), and large majorities rated the job performance of the city's police as excellent or good (67% of whites, 70% of blacks) (*Washington Post* 1997) and were generally satisfied with the police who work in their neighborhood (81% of whites, 75% of blacks) (Bureau of Justice Statistics 1999b). Citizens typically report greater satisfaction on general questions like these than on specific questions, such as those examined here.

Older data are available on citizens' perceptions of police bias in Washington. A 1966 survey asked residents of three predominantly middle-class areas whether they thought that being black "usually makes a difference" in how a person is treated by police in Washington (Biderman et al. 1967). Twice as many blacks (54%) as whites (27%) believed that race made a difference.³ Of those who thought it made a difference, blacks were more likely than whites to say that blacks were treated rudely or "picked on more," and three times more likely (45% and 15%, respectively) to believe that blacks were subjected to police brutality. A significant number of whites (22%) surprisingly took the view that blacks were given "preferential treatment" by police, a notion blacks rejected (only 3% agreed).

The three neighborhoods examined here are located in separate areas of the city that are socioeconomically and racially similar to the study sites; they are not atypical of surrounding neighborhoods, though the lower-class site is not too far from a

³ That only a bare majority of middle-class blacks took this view in 1966 runs counter to the 1960s literature on police-minority relations, which depicted those relations as overwhelmingly hostile; that literature focused on black ghettos rather than middle-class areas (see Fogelson 1968; Hahn 1971; Jacob 1971; Levy 1968).

middle-class section of the city. Each locale is served by a different police district. Socioeconomically, the two middle-class neighborhoods (Cloverdale and Merrifield) are affluent and roughly similar, whereas Spartanburg is disadvantaged (see Table 1). Housing in Spartanburg consists mostly of row houses, in addition to some old Victorians and some abandoned buildings and vacant lots, but no public housing complexes. Merrifield and Cloverdale residents live mostly in attractive single-family homes. Crime rates were relatively low and fairly similar in the two middle-class communities, but much higher in Spartanburg where the homicide rate was six times that in the other two areas (Table 1). The crime rates are consistent with residents' perceptions: 80% of the Spartanburg respondents said that crime was a serious problem in the neighborhood, compared to less than one-quarter of the Merrifield and Cloverdale respondents.

Table 1. Neighborhood Racial Composition, Socioeconomic Profile, and Crime

	Racial Composition			Socioeconomic Profile			
	White	Black	Other	Median Household Income	Unemployment Rate	Families Below Poverty Level	Households on Public Assistance
Spartanburg	8%	88%	6%	\$18,000	10.4%	13.6%	13%
Merrifield	14%	86%	0%	\$52,600	5.3%	2.4%	5%
Cloverdale	86%	11%	3%	\$61,100	2.5%	0.8%	5%
Washington, DC	30%	66%	4%	\$30,700	7.2%	17.0%	9%

	Neighborhood Crime						
	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto Theft
Number							
Spartanburg	55	44	919	1122	1522	2238	730
Merrifield	5	4	104	69	319	614	436
Cloverdale	4	1	54	21	343	545	121
Rate^a							
Spartanburg	.95	.76	15.9	19.4	26.3	38.7	12.6
Merrifield	.16	.12	3.0	2.0	9.0	17.3	12.3
Cloverdale	.14	.04	1.7	.7	10.9	17.4	3.9

SOURCES: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990; Metropolitan Police Department, Washington, D.C.

^a Mean rate for 1985–1995 per 1,000 population in 1990.

As a prelude to the following discussion, it will be helpful to sketch my respondents' views on some other aspects of policing. On several key questions, Merrifield and Cloverdale people were in fairly close agreement and gave the police higher ratings than Spartanburg residents. Spartanburg respondents were more likely to express overall dissatisfaction with the city's police department (47% in Spartanburg, 28% in Merrifield, 26% in Cloverdale) and more likely to believe that at least half of the city's police officers would need to be fired to produce a good police department (40%, 22%, and 14%, respectively). With re-

spect to police activity at the neighborhood level, Spartanburg residents are much more likely than their Merrifield and Cloverdale counterparts to say that police stop people in the neighborhood without good reason (35%, 5%, 11%), verbally abuse neighborhood residents (35%, 7%, 9%), and use excessive force against neighborhood residents (28%, 4%, 6%) (see Weitzer 1999). However, the fact that residents of the two middle-class communities are attitudinally similar in many substantive areas does not mean that they agree on other issues, as will be evident in the following discussion of racialized policing.

Police Treatment of Individuals

Replicating the 1966 survey question above, respondents were asked if they thought being black “usually makes a difference” in how a person is treated by the police in Washington. Cloverdale whites differ markedly from their 1966 counterparts on this issue. Whereas two-thirds of middle-class whites in 1966 rejected the idea that blacks were treated differently by police in Washington, 7 out of 10 Cloverdale whites agreed with this statement three decades later (see Table 2). Racially disparate treatment is not invisible to these whites.

Table 2. Police Treatment of Individuals.

Question: If a person is black, do you think this usually makes a difference in how he or she is treated by the police in Washington?

	Spartanburg	Merrifield	Cloverdale
Yes	82%	65%	71%
No	14%	28%	15%
Don't know	4%	7%	15%
Total	100%	100%	101%
(N)	(56)	(57)	(34)

$\chi^2 = 4.13$, $df = 2$, $p = .1265$ (Respondents answering “Don't know” were excluded from the test of independence.)

Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

While 54% of middle-class blacks surveyed in 1966 said that being black “usually makes a difference” in how a person is treated by the police in Washington, a higher percentage subscribes to this view today in the two African American study sites: 65% in Merrifield and 82% in Spartanburg (Table 2). And for almost all respondents, black and white, who perceived differential police conduct, the qualitative data show that this means *worse* treatment for blacks, not better treatment.

While the neighborhood differences are not statistically significant ($p = .1265$), a racial difference does emerge in responses to the open-ended follow-up questions. The qualitative data presented below show that white and black respondents differed

in the *meanings* of and *explanations* for racially disparate police behavior.

Consistent with national survey findings showing that blacks are inclined to believe that various forms of anti-black discrimination exist (Schuman et al. 1997) and to believe that racism and racial discrimination are common among police officers (Weitzer & Tuch 1999), many blacks in Spartanburg and Merrifield identified racism as the root cause of unequal treatment of black citizens. For many it is a matter of *simple racism*, irreducible or unrelated to other factors. Frequently we were told that blacks were treated worse because of “stereotypes,” “prejudice,” or “skin color”—reasons that were not elaborated on and were often presented as facts of life.⁴ As an elderly Spartanburg man remarked,

I imagine it's just simple discrimination, really, because not during my lifetime here [65 years in Washington] have I ever seen police harass or mistreat whites as they have blacks. . . . If there's somebody to get roughed up, it's always been somebody black. And that was true when the police force here was predominantly white and it's true today when it's predominantly black. The blacks always get the short end of the stick.

Other respondents went beyond the simple racism interpretation and offered accounts that linked racism to the two explanations discussed below.

One of these is the idea that *black criminality* accounts for racial disparities in police practices—that is, the notion that blacks' disproportionate involvement in street crime explains differential police treatment of blacks and whites. It is well-established that police officers use skin color as a proxy for criminal propensity (Johnson 1983; Harris 1997; Kennedy 1997), and many citizens share this view. A majority of whites see blacks as crime-prone (Swigert & Farrell 1976) and violence-prone,⁵ in part because they are overrepresented in media reports on street crime (Entman 1992). Four-fifths of the white Cloverdale respondents who believe police treat blacks differently in Washington explained this in terms of crime, which made police more apt to regard blacks with suspicion or apprehension. Black criminality was not a popular explanation for differential treatment among black respondents, but it was mentioned by one-seventh of the

⁴ It is noteworthy, however, that respondents rarely reported hearing police use racial epithets. It is possible that the abundance of black officers in Washington decreases the frequency of racial slurs by officers (Weitzer forthcoming). Black officers may be less inclined than white officers to make prejudiced remarks (as Black and Reiss [1967] found in an earlier study), or their very preponderance may affect the police subculture in such a way that both black and white officers curb their use of racial epithets.

⁵ In the 1990 General Society Survey, 54% of whites and 34% of blacks believed that blacks were prone to violence, whereas 17% of whites and 34% of blacks believed that whites were violence-prone (Davis & Smith 1996).

respondents in each of the two African American neighborhoods.

Analysis uncovered two polar subthemes regarding the effects of putative criminality: black crime leads to either *justifiable* or *invidious* police bias against black citizens. Most of the whites who cited black criminality embraced the former position. Some used probabilistic reasoning to naturalize discriminatory treatment: police were more wary or suspicious of blacks because of a greater likelihood or a higher rate of black involvement in crime in Washington. This logic is poignantly revealed in the notion that if police “see someone running they may be influenced by their color in deciding whether they might have committed a crime; just based on statistics, that would be something one could assume” (Cloverdale woman, age 53), and in the reasoning that casually equates blacks and criminals: “Given who commits most of the crimes, I think it’s a legitimate position to take. Police have more fear of dealing with black potential criminals, black citizens as opposed to white” (Cloverdale man, age 44). In addition, if blacks are “out of place” in white neighborhoods, it is only logical that police would treat them with more suspicion:

If a black person were in this neighborhood and they were walking around, the police might stop them just because of their skin color and because they look like they don’t belong in the neighborhood. We’ve had a lot of burglaries and break-ins in the neighborhood, especially during the summer months, and the assumption is that most are done by black citizens rather than by white citizens in the area. (Cloverdale man, age 50)

That most Cloverdale whites see racially disparate treatment as *rational discrimination* in response to black crime indicates that the abovementioned reversal in white attitudes since the 1966 survey is less of a sea change than the sheer numbers suggest—and also shows the value of open-ended questions in elucidating the logic behind responses to fixed-choice questions. Differential treatment is now conceded but the qualitative data show that the onus is placed on blacks rather than the police. It is not only whites, however, who equate minority race with criminal propensity. Some African Americans do this as well and argue that black criminality justifies disparate police treatment of citizens: “I guess because of a lot of crime, that’s why police treat us different. Because we kill each other. . . . A lot of teenagers make it bad for everybody else” (Spartanburg man, 24). And a consequence of disproportionate criminal involvement is that “any black then would likely be a suspect unless he can prove himself otherwise” (Merrifield man, 75).

Most black respondents in Spartanburg and Merrifield, however, took the view that black criminality was *an explanation but not a justification* for discrimination—an indefensible reason for

treating blacks differently. Many added that such bias was objectionable because it was indiscriminate. Because of the behavior of a criminal element, law-abiding blacks are burdened with a presumption of guilt and subjected to unfair scrutiny by police:

If you're black there's a presumption of guilt, a presumption of wrongdoing if you're stopped. I think white folks are probably treated with a great deal more respect, a lot more tolerance and patience.

Interviewer: Why?

I don't think it's different with police than any other kind of environment. The racial problems in this country just filter right on down to the police department. Stereotyping—you see a young black male, he's a criminal. (Merrifield woman, 46)

The same behavior by whites and blacks can be interpreted racially by police officers—part of a larger proclivity to presume black wrongdoing and accord whites the benefit of the doubt. The following remarks suggest that this is a routinely occurring “hidden injury” of race that blacks suffer silently but few whites experience or comprehend:

When black people walk with our hands in our pockets, we look like we're up to something. When a white man walk with his hands [in his pockets] we know he cold. It's like that with me. . . . They're always on the black man. (Spartanburg man, 26)

If they stop a white guy at three in the morning, they'll figure he was working late and he's on his way home to see his wife. You stop a black person at three in the morning and figure he was up to no good, or just got through robbing a store, shooting somebody or whatever. Always assuming the worst when it's someone of color. (Spartanburg man, 24)

A third explanation for differential treatment of blacks and whites centers on the *stereotypes and racialized expectations* that both police and citizens bring to encounters. This means that officers and black citizens approach each other with certain preconceptions that lend themselves to less favorable treatment of blacks, compared to whites. Consistent with observational research on police-citizen interactions (Black 1971; Sykes & Clark 1975; Wiley & Hudik 1974), respondents accounted for racially disparate police conduct by making one or more of the following points: (1) police approach black citizens with undue suspicion; (2) blacks often anticipate unfair treatment from officers and thus withhold respect and deference, which is conducive to harsh police reactions; and (3) the very exercise of police authority (often brusque and authoritarian) may be mistakenly construed by citizens as symptomatic of racial discrimination, again leading to conflicts that result in punitive treatment of black citizens. Such proclivities may be interpreted in favor of the police (the tendency among Cloverdale whites) or in favor of citizens (the tendency among blacks in Spartanburg and Merrifield). Some black

respondents, for example, interpreted brusque treatment as racial bias:

You're treated like dirt if you're black. . . . They have their ways of being nasty. "Well I don't care if you call. I'll lock you up!" You can't say anything to them. They don't care. They don't listen. (Spartanburg woman, 38)

When the citizen is black, the police tend to treat them in more of a brusque manner, tell them to move along, tell them that they are in danger of violating the law when really in fact they're not. (Merrifield woman, 33)

Others, by contrast, seemed cognizant of officers' need to assert authority:

There's a thing like authoritative diction. They feel that they need to use that type of vocabulary to get the person's attention or their respect or to get their authoritative distance from that person. . . . I'd like to assume that—other than to say they're just being a asshole. I understand the dynamics behind the speech. (Merrifield man, 29)

Citizens' demeanor is also important. Some renowned observational studies of police-citizen interactions have shown that discourtesy or impudence toward officers can fuel conflicts and result in punitive police action, while a respectful demeanor is a decided asset.⁶ Respectfulness was decisive for some of my respondents, who believed that police conduct was shaped by citizen behavior:

I think it also has to do with how they respond to whatever police officers are [doing]. . . . If you stop me for something, if I'm calm as opposed to me calling you a whole sack of something, you're going to talk to me better than if I were belligerent. You try to start off with a mutual respect for them. (Merrifield woman, 49)

If . . . you're talking to them with respect, I think [police will] do the same to you. . . . But these days people are being treated different because of the way they carry themselves and the way they talk back; when they should be listening, they don't listen, so that's why they're treated unfairly. (Merrifield woman, 48)

One's appearance can also influence police perceptions: "ghetto" or "gangster" clothes and expensive jewelry may be taken by police as signs of suspiciousness or criminality. Insofar as attire, language, and gestures are cues of troublesome or potentially dangerous persons—what Skolnick (1966:45) calls "symbolic assailants"—police may treat such persons harshly or unfairly. There may be a sense in which police generalizations

⁶ Disrespectful behavior includes name-calling, yelling, belittling, defiance, and slurs. Observational research suggests that blacks are more likely than whites to be uncooperative or disrespectful toward police officers, either unilaterally or in mutually uncivil exchanges (Black & Reiss 1967; Piliavin & Briar 1964; Sykes & Clark 1975). Police officers also hold this view. A survey of black police officers in Washington, for instance, found that they were five times more likely to consider white citizens than black citizens cooperative and friendly toward them (49% and 10%, respectively) (Beard 1977).

about “attire, the image you present, the way you speak” is, as a young Cloverdale woman believed, a function of “mostly just classism, not racism,” but research suggests that police tend to view such things through a racial prism—defined differently depending on a person’s race (Piliavin & Briar 1964; Skolnick 1966). Even affluent status does not necessarily pay dividends in blacks’ encounters with police. For example, it is blacks, not whites, driving new luxury cars who are stopped and searched, ostensibly because these drivers fit the drug-dealer profile (Harris 1997). As a 25-year-old Merrifield man put it, “If I was to get pulled over I’d get a lot of stereotypical views. Especially being a young black with the vehicle I drive, they’re more suspicious of me than if I’m white. There’s always going to be a double standard.” Another informant elaborated on this point:

You can make \$100,000 a year and you can be dressed very nicely. . . and drive a Lexus, but if there was a confrontation between officers and a black man with a Lexus, a white police officer would be more apt to think that this black man might not have the credibility. . . . If it was a white guy with a tie on, I think he would be given much more credibility as not doing wrong. He’s not perceived as obtaining his car through ill-gotten gains. (Spartanburg woman, 49)

A status symbol for whites, expensive clothes and cars are a risk factor for blacks in contacts with the police.

Police stereotypes of young blacks may create a vicious circle affecting the behavior of both officers and the youths:

If you’re black and you’re wearing that type of [gang] clothing then you’re automatically tagged as a member. And it could be just some young kids emulating [gangs], but you’re going to automatically be stopped. In a sense I can’t blame [the police], due to how the police are being treated and disrespected. . . . I think it has a lot to do with [the youths’] attitudes sometimes, because you already. . . know you’re going to be stopped simply because of your color, because they just assume that you’ve done something or you’re going to do something. (Merrifield woman, 54)

Some respondents discussed these forms of antiblack bias in global terms, while others used their own experiential knowledge as evidence of police discrimination. Accounts based on personal experiences or observations ranged from the relatively mild intrusion (e.g., police questioning a person about her presence in a locale) to more forceful actions such as the practice of “proning out” people on the ground, even during minor traffic stops: “I have been stopped before and . . . the first thing they say is, ‘Get out of the car and lie down!’ Rather than trying to prove whether you did something wrong or not” (Spartanburg man, 36). Another Spartanburg resident contrasted two incidents she had witnessed:

This was a black person, they pulled him out of the car, slammed him up against the car, down on the ground, and then started asking him questions. I think they should have asked him a question before all this happened. And this person was innocent.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Well, they let him go. And after that the guy got up and said, "Well man, why did you do all that? Why couldn't you just tell me what you wanted before you did all that?" And then there was another incident, a different place. It was a white cop . . . [and] a white person, but [the police] immediately start explaining to him why they stopped him, why they pulled him over. They start talking to him. They didn't slam him on the ground like that white cop did to that black. (Spartanburg woman, 56)

Disparate treatment of whites and blacks living in the *same* community may also spell discrimination, as this man pointed out:

We had two white women who lived in one of the houses across the street, and they had a break-in, and I think the whole department arrived on the scene—fingerprint experts, all kinds of crime lab people, and it looked like the O.J. [Simpson] murder scene. . . . I have a break-in and one police officer showed up, and he was arrogant and fresh. Now, there is a perfect illustration on this very street; and my house certainly would be equivalent, the contents of my house, of anything they had in theirs. (Spartanburg man, 64)

In sum, although most respondents believed that police treat blacks differently than whites, white respondents tended to justify this behavior and thus effectively attached the lion's share of the blame to blacks rather than to the police, whereas blacks were more inclined to define disparate treatment as invidious and racially motivated. This racial difference in interpretations of police conduct is consistent with previous research showing that race is a strong predictor of attitudes toward the police.

Police Treatment of Neighborhoods

Police may discriminate not only against individuals but also against neighborhoods populated by different racial groups. How do people conceive of police relations with black versus white neighborhoods? Do they believe police provide better services or otherwise favor some neighborhoods over others? And if police treat neighborhoods differently, how do people account for this? There is no literature addressing these questions.

Respondents were asked a comparative question: "Do you think the police get along better, worse, or about the same with people in this neighborhood as they do with people in [mostly black/mostly white] neighborhoods in Washington?" Half the Cloverdale whites thought that police have better relations with

people in Cloverdale than in the city's mostly black neighborhoods, while most Spartanburg residents (62%) said their neighborhood was treated worse than white neighborhoods (see Table 3). These are roughly equivalent comparative perspectives, crossing neighborhood-race and -class lines. Merrifield stands apart from the other two communities: fully 61% said Merrifield was treated similarly to white neighborhoods. Differences between the sites were statistically significant ($p < .0001$).

Table 3. Police Treatment of Neighborhoods.

Question: Do you think the police get along better, worse, or about the same with people in this neighborhood as they do with people in [mostly white/mostly black] neighborhoods in Washington?

	Spartanburg	Merrifield	Cloverdale
Better	13%	18%	50%
Worse	62%	16%	9%
About the same	22%	61%	22%
Don't know	4%	5%	19%
Total	101%	100%	100%
(N)	(55)	(56)	(32)

$\chi^2 = 53.3$, $df = 4$, $p < .0001$ (Respondents answering "Don't know" were excluded from the test of independence.)

Totals may not equal 100% due to rounding.

The qualitative data reveal that "worse" treatment meant the standard things: slow response time, insufficient police patrols, cursory investigations of crimes, unwarranted stops, harassment, incivility, and brutality. Responses to the open-ended questions were essential for understanding the logic and nuances informing subjects' answers on this item. Of the one-fifth of Cloverdale whites who thought police treated neighborhoods similarly, some simply assumed that the nature of police activity was invariable across neighborhoods, like the man who said, "It must be the same." Others balanced the pros and cons of relations in each type of locale and concluded that the net effect was the same. For example, Cloverdale was described as having little potential for either negative *or* positive relations with police, whereas *both* could exist in black communities, where there was potential for conflict (due to greater police intervention in these communities) and for warm relations (due to racial affinity between black officers and residents). White neighborhoods presented fewer problems for police, but there is also greater social distance between residents and officers.

Both Cloverdale and Spartanburg respondents gave great weight to *crime* as an explanation for neighborhood-level variation in police activity, and residents of both neighborhoods tended to equate high-crime areas with black communities and low-crime areas with white communities. Because of this association, it was easy to conclude that black neighborhoods had worse relations with the police than white areas. Cloverdale was de-

picted as virtually crime-free, in stark contrast to black communities:

In the mostly black neighborhoods it's almost like a war going on, so the situation is very different. You've got situations where there are gangs or groups that are killing each other. (Cloverdale woman, 42)

Spartanburg residents made similar comparative observations:

I think [white] neighborhoods have less criminals. We have a crack house in our neighborhood that we've been trying to get rid of, and our frustration in trying to get rid of it sometimes spills over into our communications with the police department. . . . And we know that's not happening on Foxhall Road [a white area]. So they probably get along swimmingly with people over there. (Spartanburg woman, 35)

Probably because of all the crime and constantly having to deal with drug dealers and shootings and stabbings and violent crimes, whereas in the white neighborhoods, they may have an occasional robbery or maybe a domestic call. I think [the police] are just trouble-minded when they come [into this] beat. (Spartanburg woman, 28)

The white neighborhoods are quiet, and we know quite well it's mainly the black people that make trouble. (Spartanburg man, 22)

Variations in crime rates between black and white communities are thus used to explain neighborhood differences in police behavior and in police-community relations more generally. While both Cloverdale and Spartanburg respondents used this observation to account for disparate police actions across neighborhoods, many blacks again objected to the way in which police typifications of communities, as criminogenic or troublesome, could become a liability for law-abiding residents, who suffer "ecological contamination" by virtue of their residential location (Smith 1986; Werthman & Piliavin 1967).

A related explanation for differential police treatment of neighborhoods is the presence or absence of palpable *friction* between residents and police. Friction is manifested in diffuse neighborhood resentment, in displays of disrespect, or in outright threats to officers, and is partly a function of the predominant style of law enforcement in a locale. In middle-class areas, policing tends to be reactive (responses to residents' calls), whereas poor neighborhoods experience greater proactive policing (officers initiate contacts and engage in more obtrusive stops of people on the streets) (Groves 1968; President's Commission 1967). The latter, involuntary contacts are often perceived as unjustified or as sheer harassment and are thus resented, particularly by blacks (Bordua & Tift 1971; Hahn 1971; Jacob 1971; Browning et al. 1994; Walker et al. 1972). Both Cloverdale and Spartanburg informants argued that black communities experience more conflict with police than white communities, which

helped explain why black communities are treated worse by police:

There's less tension with the police in the more affluent, more white areas, and there's more tension with police in other parts of the DC area that have less income and more minority communities. And it's probably reciprocated. . . . When the police are in the [affluent] Northwest area and it's nice and they're responding to somebody's home being broken into, they're going to try to be nice to people, and they're going to be nice back to the cop because he's helping. It's a different story when you're down in [low-income] Southeast and it's a street bust, somebody's getting pulled over for crack or what have you—then the cops are more on edge. I think the black community has probably a rightful apprehension of police officers, so they're not cooperative and there's a lot more tension. (Cloverdale man, 23)

Spartanburg people drew similar contrasts:

In a white neighborhood an officer is probably more interactive with the residents; they'd know you, speak to you, things of that nature. Here, in my neighborhood there's tension, animosity. A lot of residents are afraid of officers. They're not going to come at you and converse unless they know you on a personal basis. You can hang it up as far as someone saying, "Good morning, officer." (Spartanburg man, 27)

This man assumed that in white neighborhoods positive interaction is "always taking place" between police and residents—an idealized picture that Cloverdale residents would dispute because their contacts with police are so episodic and cursory. Cloverdale people agree, however, that the neighborhood is free of hostility toward the police.

Communities like Spartanburg also differ from white neighborhoods, according to respondents, in that residents are more inclined to challenge the authority of officers:

If the guys are out and a cop comes up and harasses them, now you know they're going to give the cop a hard time. They are not going to walk away peacefully, "Oh, yes sir, Officer. We will move along." Right! You know they're going to give the man some back talk. It's automatic because they feel like they're being threatened. . . . Anyone would. "I'm out here minding my business, playing my music, having a good time. He has no right to come over and bother me." But you know in a different neighborhood, a white neighborhood, "Oh, yes sir, officer. We're going to turn our music down. I'm so sorry. I had no idea the music was up that loud." And he gets to go on his way without any flack. (Spartanburg woman, 38)

Also coloring the perceptions of both parties are stereotypes rooted in cumulative experiences. Conflicts arise:

partly because of the attitude of some of the people living in the neighborhood. Sometimes when we deal with police we automatically set up certain barriers from past experiences, like Rodney King, the Mark Fuhrman incident, personal experiences. And from their past experiences dealing with certain neighborhoods and certain groups of people . . . a lot of officers come in with preconceived attitudes on how to deal with certain groups of people. I think that may be worse here than [in] a white neighborhood. (Spartanburg man, 33)

The level of danger facing officers is a key aspect of this overall tension quotient. With respect to areas where street crime is rampant and where officers face heightened risks, a Cloverdale man saw “good reason for the police to be paranoid and a little bit tense,” and a Cloverdale woman remarked,

When they go into [Cloverdale], they’re not expecting that someone’s going to shoot them and I doubt that there’s the same level of alertness . . . [as in] an area of the city that’s a known drug market. . . . I just can’t imagine that their blood pressure is as high when they’re driving through [Cloverdale]. No one’s going to shoot at them.

A young Spartanburg man echoed these appraisals when he observed that police working in white communities can relax “because they know they don’t have to worry about anything from whites. Police know [whites are not] gonna shoot at you.”

In general, the data reveal substantial agreement between Spartanburg and Cloverdale residents in their comparisons of police relations with their own versus other-race communities. These descriptions are largely mirror images of each other. Merrifield residents, however, tend to disagree with the other two groups’ generalizations about “black neighborhoods.” They distanced Merrifield from places like Spartanburg and equated it with affluent, white areas like Cloverdale. A substantial majority of Merrifield people thought that their neighborhood was treated similarly to white neighborhoods, and they portrayed Merrifield and white neighborhoods as being on “the same level” with residents who were “the same caliber of people,” in the words of two residents. Friction with the police was lacking in both contexts. Most respondents had never experienced, witnessed, or heard about conflicts between police and residents in Merrifield: “Because of the absence of crime and the absence of constant police patrolling, as I’ve observed it, there are very few confrontations with police officers in this area” (Merrifield man, 63). Merrifield was described as a world apart from ghetto areas with high crime rates and street disorder, repeated police interventions, and frequent police-citizen clashes:

The people around here are mostly middle-aged, middle-class black folks, educated folks, so they would get along about the same here as they would in a predominantly white neighborhood. We’ve never had a bunch of idiots running up and down

the street cursing at the police when they pull up. If there's somebody on the street calling the police, somebody might be curious and go outside and see what's going on, but you're not going to have a bunch of people milling around and calling the police a bunch of names, as you would in a neighborhood in [lower-class areas]. I carried mail in the projects, so I know the differences. . . . If you are [an officer] in a neighborhood where tension is high all the time, you're going to react differently. Being in a predominantly black, low-class, project-type, welfare-type neighborhood, he's under more tension and more pressure than he would be in this neighborhood. When he drives up to a corner and sees 12 or 13 young hard-heads standing on the corner, the blood pressure automatically rises a little bit, because he doesn't know what he's going to run into, whereas when it comes to this neighborhood, you don't see anybody standing on the corner. (Merrifield man, 58)

From Merrifield's vantage point, it is not a community's racial complexion that determines its relationship with the police, but rather the amount of local crime and disorder and the degree to which residents are receptive toward the police—all related to a neighborhood's class position:

I believe it's different . . . because of the people in the neighborhood. . . . [Merrifield has] more stable people, and not a lot is going on. It's so quiet sometimes it's amazing. And I know another neighborhood where there's constant stuff going on, police are constantly there. Every time I go over to my mother's neighborhood [a black working-class area], the police are there and somebody's hollering and screaming, somebody's getting put out. A lot is going on. So I do believe different locations do have different attitudes, different things happening. (Merrifield woman, 43)

I don't think that people in [Spartanburg] embrace them the same way that my neighbors may embrace the officers in our neighborhood. . . . [Police] see [Merrifield] as a middle-class neighborhood . . . [with] middle-class nuclear families, so they're more apt to be calmer, like, "Okay, we're going to deal with this in a calm, rational manner." (Merrifield woman, 23)

A final explanation for differential police treatment of neighborhoods is a community's capacity to hold officers accountable for their actions. Neighborhoods differ in their access to the municipal power structure, including elected officials and the police hierarchy. For Spartanburg people, black neighborhoods have no influence over elites, whereas white power is a constraint upon police who work in white neighborhoods:

They can do what they want to us. . . . In the white neighborhood you cannot do that [mistreat people] and get away with it. Oh, no! They're not having that. They raise all kinds of stink. They'll get the Mayor's office [involved]. (Spartanburg woman, 48)

The police force treats white folks different, because if they go up there [to white communities] and get mean with white folks, they're not going to take it. They're gonna write in; they're going to complain. Whereas if they come down here and get mean with somebody, we might just snap at them, but we're not gonna write in and say, "This officer has a bad attitude or is being abusive." We might let it go on for a long, long time, until we have an incident like Rodney King. I feel like those officers had probably been abusing people for a long time. (Spartanburg woman, 45)

Cloverdale residents largely agreed that black communities are powerless, and they predicted that Cloverdale would put up strong resistance to police mistreatment; they also claimed that local officers were fully cognizant of this.

While Spartanburg and Cloverdale residents tended to describe neighborhood power disparities in strictly racial terms, Merrifield people reported that Merrifield enjoyed its own clout, due to its class position. The neighborhood is home to politically connected people, doctors, lawyers, and a strong civic association that would not hesitate to complain to the authorities about police abuses. This is not lost on police who "go further to make sure that our neighborhood is satisfied" (Merrifield woman, 38) because they wish to avoid complaints from such influential people.⁷ Although Cloverdale residents do not seem to recognize this, the Merrifield data suggest that the degree of police accountability to local residents may be structured more along neighborhood-class lines than neighborhood-race lines. Affluent communities, both white and black, are in a better position than low-income areas to check police misconduct.

The findings point to the need for careful examination of middle-class black communities, which have been almost entirely neglected by scholars.⁸ Although the data show that Merrifield people recognize race as one factor in police-community relations, they are also class-conscious. Merrifield informants drew comparisons both to lower-class black communities and to middle-class white communities. This dual perspective was not evident among people in Spartanburg who, when asked about white neighborhoods, understandably thought in racial terms and did not contemplate the state of police-community relations in black middle-class locales. Insofar as class consciousness is muted

⁷ Officers assigned to Merrifield confirmed to us that residents have high expectations regarding police responsiveness to their needs, can be "pretty demanding," and that they have "pull" with city officials and the police hierarchy, illustrated by their successful demand that a particular sergeant be assigned to the community.

⁸ Two exceptions only reinforce the need for more research. Feagin and Sikes (1994) studied middle-class blacks outside of neighborhood context and scattered across several cities, and Pattillo-McCoy's (1999) work is flawed because the "neighborhood" she studied is too large and socioeconomically diverse to qualify as either middle class or as a neighborhood by any standard criteria. It contains 11,700 residents; 12% of its families are below the poverty line; and 28% earn less than \$25,000 per year.

among Spartanburg residents, this is arguably a function of the socioeconomic and ecological forces that govern ghetto life. If middle-class blacks live at the intersection of racial discrimination and class advantage, and thus view the world from these twin vantage points, the lower class is more circumscribed by its structural position (Anderson 1990:40–42; cf. Dillingham 1981). Social and physical isolation from other locales is one feature of ghetto life (Massey & Denton 1993:161; Wilson 1987:60–61), which means that lower-class blacks have less familiarity with middle-class black communities and thus tend to see affluence as a white preserve, paying handsome dividends for whites but not blacks:

In white neighborhoods like Georgetown there are patrol cars but you won't hear sirens all the time and you won't see people getting harassed. You won't see anything. So police will get along better with them than they will with us. (Spartanburg woman, 18)

Go about six or seven blocks over that way. You can see the same policemen that patrol this area sitting in their cars talking to the white people mowing their lawns. In this area the only time you see a policeman talking to somebody is when they're looking for somebody, showing them pictures, or asking them questions about a crime. They don't ever get no further with us, but they talk friendly with the white people. . . . And you see them come flying through here, but [in white areas] they sitting in front of white people's houses; white people are sitting there talking to them. It's really something! (Spartanburg woman, 56)

Merrifield respondents, by contrast, asserted that their neighborhood enjoyed a relationship with the police that was comparable to that in white communities.

Comparing the results of the two questions, Cloverdale respondents are fairly consistent: most believe that black individuals are treated differently by police than whites and that black communities have worse relations with police than does Cloverdale. In both cases, Cloverdale whites tend to stereotype black individuals and neighborhoods as crime-prone. Spartanburg people agree that black individuals and communities are treated worse by police and, like their Cloverdale counterparts, they tend to equate black neighborhoods with poverty and high crime rates and white neighborhoods with affluence and low crime rates, without considering low-crime, affluent black communities. Perceptions in Merrifield are more complex. Although its residents agree that black individuals are treated differently, they do not subscribe to the view that black and white communities are necessarily treated differently. Many insist that neighborhood class position is decisive. This is consistent with their views on another set of questions: they believed that police relations with people inside Merrifield are generally positive, whereas the

same residents are treated more unfavorably when they travel outside the neighborhood (see Weitzer 1999). This kind of dual perspective was largely absent among Cloverdale and Spartanburg residents.

Multivariate Analysis

The bivariate analysis in Table 2 revealed no significant neighborhood differences in perceptions of differential police treatment of blacks in Washington (though the qualitative data did reveal racial variation in how “different” treatment is understood and explained). Neighborhood differences were found, however, for perceptions of police relations with black and white neighborhoods (Table 3). Merrifield respondents evaluated these relations differently from their Spartanburg and Cloverdale counterparts.

Does this pattern hold when the white subsamples in Merrifield and Spartanburg (excluded from Tables 2 and 3) are included and when individual-level variables (age, gender, etc.) are taken into account? For example, if age is related to satisfaction with the police, the fact that the median age of Merrifield respondents is somewhat older than that of the other two samples may explain some of the neighborhood difference on the second item. To address this question, a logistic regression analysis was performed on the entire sample (see Table 4)—with the proviso that the data permit only qualified conclusions from this analysis. One logistic model was fitted for each question: the model includes two dummy variables that compare Merrifield and Cloverdale with Spartanburg, and measures of race, income, education, age, and gender at the individual level.⁹

Consistent with the bivariate finding on the first question—perceptions of police treatment of individual blacks in Washington, D.C.—the neighborhood variable is not significant. Overall, this model has little predictive power, as indicated by the non-significant model chi-square. This is due to the fact that most respondents agreed that police treat blacks differently than

⁹ In order to fit a logistic regression model, the nominal response categories for the dependent variable must be dichotomous. The response categories for the first question (on differential treatment of individual blacks in Washington) were already defined dichotomously as “yes” and “no” responses. Respondents who answered “don’t know” were excluded. For the second question (comparing black and white neighborhoods), the small number of respondents who said that police got along better in black neighborhoods or worse in white neighborhoods were excluded from the logistic analysis. Responses were then recorded so that Cloverdale residents who said that relations between the police and their neighborhoods were better than in black neighborhoods were treated as equivalent to respondents in Merrifield and Spartanburg who said that police relations with their neighborhood were worse than in white neighborhoods. This was done to reduce the number of sparse cells in the analysis and to distinguish between respondents who perceive police discrimination against black communities and those who see policing as a color-blind enterprise.

Table 4. Logistic Regression Estimates on Attitudes toward Racially Disparate Policing

	Do police treat blacks differently?	Do police treat black and white neighborhoods differently?†
Merrifield	-.9099	-2.4653*
Cloverdale	.9160	.5968
Race (1 = Black)	1.7847*	1.0735
Income	-.0665	.2223
Education	.3229	-.2101
Age	-.4319	.6227
Gender (1 = Male)	.0018	-.0211
Model χ^2	11.58	30.70*
(N)	(134)	(106)

† Predicts likelihood of perceiving that police have worse relations with people in black neighborhoods than in white neighborhoods versus perceiving that relations are about the same (black worse = 1, same = 0). See footnote 9 for further explanation.

* $p < .01$

whites in Washington. The model does show, however, that, controlling for other variables, whites are less likely than blacks to take this view.

On the second question—perceptions of police relations with racially different communities—Merrifield is the only significant variable net of the effects of the individual-level variables. People living in Merrifield tend to believe that police relations with their community are similar to those in white neighborhoods. Residents of Spartanburg and Cloverdale, by contrast, tend to believe that police get along worse with residents of black neighborhoods, and their agreement on this issue thus crosscuts neighborhood-race and -class lines. The multivariate analysis therefore supports the bivariate finding that Merrifield stands apart from the other neighborhoods in its more colorblind assessment of policing across neighborhoods.

Limitations of the data should be borne in mind in evaluating these findings: the neighborhood sample sizes are modest, and there are no blacks in the Cloverdale sample and only a small number of whites in the Merrifield and Spartanburg samples, though they are representative of the local white populations. Further, the analysis is limited to three neighborhoods in this largely qualitative study. The regression analysis cannot, therefore, test definitively for neighborhood effects. Nevertheless, the regression results do support the two bivariate findings regarding neighborhood influences.

Conclusion

Race is an important predictor of some of the perceptions examined in this study. While a large proportion of respondents in all three neighborhoods believed that race influences how a person is treated by police in Washington, D.C., and that blacks

are treated worse than whites, race emerged as a significant predictor in the multivariate analysis; and, in the qualitative data, respondents' explanations for differential police behavior also tended to follow racial lines. Black criminality was the modal explanation given by whites, but only a minority in the two black neighborhoods proffered this reason. And, of those respondents who mentioned black crime as a factor, whites tended to see it as a justification for police treating blacks differently, while blacks tended to dispute this linkage. Residents of the two black neighborhoods were more likely than residents of Cloverdale to invoke racism as an explanation, an example of the continuing significance of race for African Americans irrespective of class standing.

If there is broad agreement across the three sites that blacks are *generally* subjected to disparate treatment by police in Washington, a different pattern is found at the level of the respondent's *own neighborhood*. Merrifield is distinguished by the high percentage of residents who say the neighborhood receives similar treatment as white neighborhoods, something most Cloverdale people reject when comparing their community to black neighborhoods. Spartanburg residents overwhelmingly characterize their neighborhood as receiving inferior treatment—62% say this—and on this issue the neighborhood is a world apart from Merrifield, where only 16% take this view.

Why do Merrifield and Spartanburg residents differ in their comparative evaluations? Neighborhood conditions differ between the two areas. Merrifield's socioeconomic status manifests itself in well-maintained houses and yards and an absence of signs of neighborhood disorder: there are no abandoned houses, no open-air drug markets, and few young people loitering in public places and causing trouble. This fairly placid street ambience stands in stark contrast to Spartanburg, where the crime rate is much higher, groups of idle young people frequent the streets, crack houses exist, streetcorner drug selling is prevalent, and other street deviants (prostitutes, homeless) can be found. Both our interviews and field observations (during ride-alongs) indicate that the predominant style of policing is more benign in Merrifield than in Spartanburg, largely as a result of different law enforcement demands on officers. Proactive police intervention is not uncommon in Spartanburg, where we observed police stopping people and asking them what they were doing, whether they lived in the neighborhood, whether the officer could search them, and telling them to "move along." Such stops are rare in Merrifield and Cloverdale (Weitzer 1999).

These conditions are mirrored in residents' own characterizations of their communities. Merrifield and Cloverdale respondents described their neighborhoods in identical terms: upstanding residents, a "nice" and "stable" area, little crime, a tranquil

street scene, and little danger to police officers. Furthermore, Merrifield residents see themselves as being on the “same level” and of the “same caliber” as residents of the city’s white neighborhoods, which suggests a degree of class-consciousness in Merrifield.

These objective conditions and collective perceptions help explain why Merrifield residents believe that their community’s relations with the police are similar to what prevails in white neighborhoods. Most Cloverdale and Spartanburg residents fail to see this similarity, largely because they had in mind high-crime ghettos—not affluent areas like Merrifield—when answering this question.

The most striking findings—the gross difference between residents of Spartanburg and Merrifield and the agreement between residents of Spartanburg and Cloverdale on the neighborhood-comparison question—suggest that the class position of black communities makes at least some difference in structuring residents’ attitudes toward the police. These results challenge the sweeping claim that blacks and whites are homogeneous groups who “live in completely different worlds” in relation to the police (Bayley & Mendelsohn 1969:141). There are indeed issues on which our two black communities agree—such as the question of racially disparate police treatment of individuals—but Merrifield and Spartanburg blacks also seem to live in separate worlds with regard to their other perceptions and experiences of the police, as evidenced in the neighborhood-comparison question and other questions in this study (see Weitzer 1999; Weitzer forthcoming). If these findings are corroborated in other urban neighborhoods, it will further shatter any monolithic image of the African American population and lend support to Wilson’s (1978) argument that class inequality, not blanket racial discrimination, is now the decisive factor structuring blacks’ experiences with social institutions and their worldviews.

In light of the present findings, which point to different patterns at the citywide level and the neighborhood level, it would appear that more contextualized research is warranted, focusing on neighborhood-specific relations. A few other studies also suggest the importance of neighborhood context, but much more research is required to determine if this is indeed a key factor shaping the flavor of police-citizen relations.

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