

The Influence of Places on Police Decision Pathways: From Call for Service to Arrest

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BACKGROUND

Environmental sociologists, place-based criminologists, geographers, and social psychologists have long emphasized the significance that places have on behavior, especially criminality and victimization (Brantingham & Brantingham 1981; Eck & Weisburd 1995; McLafferty 2008; Taylor 1988; Weisburd 2002). Physical, social, and cultural aspects of places can influence or mediate the connection between an individual's cognitions and their actions. Police officers who work in the same places everyday are certainly not immune from these environmental forces. Police officers, especially those patrolling these places, are certainly not immune from these environmental forces. Place-based cues, especially those most noticeable to an officer (e.g., socioeconomic status, poverty, racial and ethnic makeup, disorder, crime, pedestrian and traffic density, and land use), may significantly affect with an officer's worldview and thereby his or her discretion.

The place-based cues that dominate the existing literature in this area primarily focus on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status of an area (see Smith 1986; Smith & Klein 1984; Terrill & Reisig 2003). Of course, this is not coincidental; the focus on police treatment as it relates especially to race is a central challenge to democratic policing and is of constant concern to policing scholars. Yet, while many would agree on the importance of understanding the impact that race and ethnicity have on officer decision making, we are far from reaching a consensus on its answer, especially the role that places play in those decisions. The place-based research tends to compare large areas, examine only certain decision points (arrest or initial stop), and compares places using dichotomous racial divisions such as "Black" and "White" or "White" and "non-White". Each of these approaches leaves much room for further understanding. Additionally, much of the existing research in this area is not place-, but individual-based, analyzing how the race and ethnicity of individuals influence specific outcomes.

The lack of place-based research in the area of race and policing is also surprising for a number of more practical reasons that go beyond social-psychological explanations. Today's policing environment is marked both by a push for officers to be more proactive and place-based in their strategies. New place-based approaches such as using proactive traffic and pedestrian stops, problem-oriented policing, zero-tolerance arrests, hotspot patrol, and anti-gang interventions have often been shown to be promising in reducing crime, but at the same time criticized for resulting in (or at least not being sensitive to) racially incongruent outcomes. Community-policing philosophies have also emphasized a place-based component to conceptualizations of fairness and legitimacy in policing, shifting both practitioner and researcher thinking from considerations about individual due process to community legitimacy and authorization.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This project adds to the research on race and discretion by examining how the racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic characteristics of very small places influence officer decision making at those places. In particular, the life course, or "decision making pathway" of incidents is examined, rather than a single decision point in that life course. Such an understanding could not only help build ecological theories of police behavior, but also serves as an opportunity to rethink community and organizational policies that address differential decision making or racial prejudice in policing. Three research questions are of specific interest to this study of decision making pathways:

1. Would places with greater concentrations of racial and ethnic minorities receive different types of police service for similar incidents when controlling for other factors?
2. Would places with greater concentrations of racial and ethnic sub-groups – specifically, foreign-born or linguistically isolated individuals – receive different types of police service?
3. If racial and ethnic disparities are discovered, can they be easily explained by the level of crime (specifically violence) at those places? Alternatively, is there perhaps an interaction effect between racial composition, concentrated poverty or violence that mediates the response of police?

DATA AND METHODS

This project proceeds given these concerns of research and practice in exploring the relationship between characteristics of small geographic areas and the decision making process of officers. I expand on previous conceptualizations of officer discretion by creating “decision pathways” that reflect multiple and chronological decision points of a single incident. This differs from existing research that focuses on a single decision point such as an initial stop or an arrest. I developed these pathways for 267,937 crimes and disorders that occurred across 568 small places within a large, diverse, and metropolitan west coast U.S. city over the course of one year. These pathways can be characterized by “upgrading” or “downgrading” in either crime seriousness or in police action. I then analyzed whether a relationship exists between these upgrading and downgrading tendencies of these pathways and the characteristics of the small places in which they occur.

The decision pathways were then geographically referenced to spatially connect them to Census block groups for analysis with other characteristics of that place. This allowed for analysis of predictors of upgrading and downgrading scores. Many demographic, socioeconomic, and crime attributes were also built into the predictive models, including racial, ethnic and foreign-born composition, measures of wealth, community needs, social disorganization, levels of violent crime, and population density.

FINDINGS

Three place-based cues seem to most consistently matter to decision making pathways: the proportion of residents that are Black, the level of wealth in that area, and the amount of violence in a block group. As expected, in places with more violence, there is evidence of more formal social control – more reports are written and arrests made. However, police show significant evidence of downgrading calls – handling them less formally (less likely to write reports or make arrests) and reducing the seriousness of crime classifications in places with higher proportion of wealthy residents *or* higher proportion of Black residents (which are more disadvantaged).

But, while both wealthy and disadvantaged block groupings with high proportions of Black residents both evidence downgrading, there seems to be *less* downgrading in communities with high proportions of Black residents compared to communities representing the wealthiest areas of this city. Similar effects are not consistently seen for places with larger proportions of Asian, Hispanic, foreign-born, or linguistically isolated households, although there are significant upgrading and downgrading activities at particular points in an investigation for these other groups.

The findings are compelling and add to a place-based theory of policing. This study indicates that it is not sufficient only to examine the individual racial characteristics of officers, suspects, victims, and witnesses in explaining officer decisions. The environment can also be correlated to behavior in important ways. Although this study does not examine which effect might be stronger (individual-level information was not available on these incidents), and motivations of upgrading and

downgrading can only be offered as hypotheses, this and other studies indicate that environmental cues condition individual action and do not simply act as a passive context for those actions. In this study, these environmental cues consist of racial and ethnic makeup, levels of violence, and socioeconomic status of the very small places where officers patrol. But place-based cues do not have to be racial or socioeconomic (although arguably, these are the strongest place-based cues). A place-based theory of policing should also take into account other environmental characteristics that may influence police officer decision making. These might include the physical layout of streets and buildings, the proportion of places that are business establishments, or the presence of certain types of environmental markers that can be magnets for certain crimes and the level of physical or social disorder (e.g., parks, public swimming pools, bars, subway stations, abandoned homes, alleys). This study provides a new dependent variable—the decision pathway—with which to examine the influence of these place markers.

Despite these steps forward, this study, like so many others examining whether disparities in police service exist, still cannot tell us *why* we see this differential response. This analysis cannot give us insight into the minds of officers as to whether racial bias influenced their decisions. This proves intent for prejudice is not only difficult short of admission, but such prejudice is intricately part of human behavior and can be hidden under layers of consciousness, organizational rules, symbolic interactions, and worldviews (Horowitz, 1985). Additionally, the origination of the disparities that emerge from this analysis may not unilaterally come from the police; they may arise from an interaction between officers' supply of law enforcement and the demand of services by the community. Expectations of this interaction, of course, are shaped by both historical forces and prejudices, but also by current interactions.

The only way for us to understand the reasons for these differences is through further systematic and qualitative approaches, including social observations, ethnographic analyses, and in-depth interviews or longitudinal psychological examination of officer *and* citizen mentality. What we can say is that the race of a place matters to police decision making, especially if that race is Black. At specific decision points, composition of other racial groups at places also matters.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This acknowledgment of differential interactions at places based on race and socioeconomic status may be difficult but important for both the police and the community. Police easily acknowledge that levels of crime and violence of a place, and even the socioeconomic status of a neighborhood can affect their style of service. But talking about race as a possible factor is almost taboo. This situation also affects the reception of research by the police, who may be willing to accept poorly conducted evaluations of an intervention's effect on crime, but may be extremely suspicious of even the most highly rigorous studies on racial disparities. How then, can this and other research be used? Three ideas could be explored:

1. Police should openly acknowledge that officers treat neighborhoods differently. Prospects and problems in differential treatment should be approached from a community-oriented and legitimacy-development perspective and should be discussed in training.
2. Awareness and acknowledgement must be supported by operational structures that counteract such forces.
3. The effect of places on policing and the mental health of officers should be a serious concern for police leaders. There is especially a need to counter inevitable changes in mental states, some that are affected by the places officers' work, which may lead to further behavioral problems such as racially biased policing or the use of force.