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Public Disconnect

A study of Police and Community Relations

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Abstract: Throughout the country there have been a number of citizen deaths committed by the police in marginalized communities. This seems to be a trend in American society dating back to the American Slave Trade. This trend was continued following the abolition of slavery with the Jim Crow era where countless individuals were beaten, murdered, and lynched on a daily basis as a form of state terrorism and control. These tactics transitioned into contemporary society creating contemporary forms of oppression where covert and institutional racist ideals followed by oppressive acts have reached their pinnacle. This succession of acts brings into question the role of law enforcement in modern society. Are they in place to ensure the safety and well-being of the individuals in the communities they serve or are they merely mid-level enforcers set in place to colonize and subjugate so-called “deviant” American societies? In order to get the answers that many of us seek I will attempt to assess police relations with community members in hopes of increasing their understanding of what is seen as black “deviant” communities.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Introduction**

Since the inception of the United States of America there has been an evident mistreatment of people of African descent beginning with the American Slave Trade. Not only were they enslaved and forced to work for no gain there were laws set in place to further oppress them. For instance, a Virginia statute of 1705 states that "If any slave resists his master...correcting such a slave, and shall happen to be killed in such correction...the master shall be free of all punishment...as if such accident never happened" (Virginia Slave Codes, PBS.org). Though this statute and all like it have been eliminated from public policy they have grown and transformed into loopholes and hidden discrimination in today’s legal system. One example of this injustice includes Arizona’s new immigration law that mandates that school resource officers can question and arrest some individuals just based on suspicion. Another is the discrepancy between sentences given for crack cocaine and powdered as well as traffic stops and tickets given to motorists with loud music. This sort of enforcement is clearly racially motivated and at the very least geared towards the demonization of certain cultures.

Fitting snuggly into the panoptic model of society addressed in Michel Foucault’s work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975)*,* the government and entities of it (magistrates) produce laws which are handed down to be enforced by law enforcement personnel (intendents) on the members of the communities. This panopticonic society according to Foucault (1975) exercises “power over men, of controlling their relations, of separating out their dangerous mixtures.” This is exactly how the government runs today, as a disciplinary machine punishing behavior that is outside of the norm and deemed “plagued” behaviors. Therefore, law enforcement personnel police communities deemed “deviant,” forcing the individuals within to conform to societal norms instead addressing the problems important to the members of the communities. This is where a relational divide comes into play where law enforcement personnel take on the ideals of panoptic discipline and fail to truly serve the people of the communities they patrol.

With the prior knowledge of how American society as a whole is constructed and the role of the police in society, this study attempts to explain why there are exponentially more incidences of police brutality in poor, Black communities than there are in white communities. This ethnographic study with members of the Champaign Police Department aims to assess how law enforcement personnel approach individuals in these marginalized communities. This research seeks to identify the primary reasons violence is used more often upon residents of marginalized communities, as well as if different approaches and attitudes account for the consistent abuse of marginalized individuals they can be analyzed. As a result, law enforcement approaches and attitudes can be addressed in order to decrease police misconduct.

Addressing the relational issues between police and the members of marginalized communities will make significant strides in creating a better quality of life for individuals that are devastated by the oppressive forces that are a result of this panoptic policing. First, this would vastly decrease the number of people from these communities being funneled into prison. In doing so it would also increase the police and community relations allowing the community members to communicate to the law enforcement personnel what concerns they have in their communities.

**Theory**

Terms: Aggressive policing, marginalized, brutality

Aggressive policing: actively combating a problem in a policed community by repeatedly addressing the known disturbance and disrupting illegal activities

Marginalized people: those who are forced into a subordinate position in society, are widely oppressed with a number of constraints and obstacles hindering advancement in personal endeavors

Brutality: physical or verbal abuse that is imposed upon someone in less of a powerful position

This study is based primarily on a variation of neighborhood theory. Chaskin (1995) defines neighborhood as a “spatial construction denoting a geographical unit in which resident share proximity and the circumstances that come with it (pp. 522-523). Since enslavement Blacks had been forced to live in segregated spatial areas. As Blacks began to move in declining neighborhoods, whites moved to suburban and rural areas which restricted Black residents either through restrictive housing covenants or prohibitive pricing. My use of neighborhood theory looks at how white police officers who choose to live in neighborhoods that are racially exclusive, are assigned to police the neighborhoods that they refuse to live it. As such, my use of neighborhood theory does not look at the sense of community among individuals within a certain neighborhood, but rather the relations between marginalized neighborhoods and the officers that police and attempt to control them who often lack connections to those communities and neighborhoods. This study is connected to neighborhood theory because it focuses on the relational problems neighborhoods have with the police that serve them. It focuses on how the individual officers view these neighborhoods and how their actions are shaped by these views.

This study is also heavily based on Foucault’s view of modern society as a panopticon. In his work, *Discipline and Punish,* Foucault refers to a panopticon which is a prison design borrowed from English philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham who developed a prison built in a circular fashion with a singular tower in the center. This tower was designed to have a one way mirror that spanned the circumference of the entire structure. From this tower one could monitor all of the prisoners at once but the key was that the prisoners never knew who or when someone was watching. The idea behind this structure was that everyone can be monitored and disciplined with the least amount of force possible.

Modern society has been fashioned in the manner, with the idea of society that every member in society is surveilled endlessly and those who are deemed deviant are treated like those in the “plagued society” which was another one of Foucault’s topics. Marginalized communities are these targeted “plagued societies” where the individuals are thought of as being diseased. Force is used to either conform them to the ideals of mainstream society, as well as to rid the social body of the disease. Those who are resistant to this rule are ultimately eliminated in one of two ways: either with brutalization or imprisonment.

This study is also driven by the theory of *The State* (The State, Marxists.org) presented by Marxist Vladimir Lenin. Speaking on the primary functions of “The State” he writes:

“a special category of people set apart to rule others and who, for the sake and purpose of rule, systematically and permanently have at their disposal a certain apparatus of coercion, an apparatus of violence, such as is represented at the present time, as you all realise, by armed contingents of troops, prisons and other means of subjugating the will of others by force—all that which constitutes the essence of the state.”

It is evident that those who are set in place as law enforcement personnel are just what their titles suggest. As mandated by the government officers of every brand enforce the law as their primary function. As Lenin argued in 1919, they control the will of others using these forces. Following this design it would seem that even those officers with the best intentions towards those in the communities that they police operate as a force of coercion for “The State” as long as they operate within the confines of laws that directly target those of marginalized communities.

**Methodology**

This research was guided by the grounded theory approach. Through this approach, research will be reviewed through a critical lens which will ultimately come by reviewing a variety of sources. These sources will include, but not be limited to, transcriptions of voice recorded interviews and field notes about observations while in the presence of the represented members of the Champaign Police Department. The Grounded Theory approach is the best theoretical framework for this particular research project because it allows the researcher, where possible, to make objective, adequate, and responsible representation of the individuals studied as well as their view of how they operate in their line of work. Also by evaluating the behaviors of these individuals during researcher interactions will perhaps provide significant insight to how the members of the Champaign Police force that participated in this study, feel about the topics covered during the course of the interactions. These types of observations taken through the Grounded Theory Approach may be significant because in many interactions methods of nonverbal communication hold important indicators of how the communicators feel about the subjects covered in the course of conversation.

All methods used in this study are geared to serve one main purpose. The first is to identify the primary reasons violence is used more often upon residents of marginalized communities. In order to do so the research will address a few more specific questions. Do Law Enforcement officials approach members of perceived “dangerous” communities with different attitudes and stereotypes than those in other communities? Do officers perceive more of a threat in certain communities that may trigger a heightened sense of policing?

Throughout the course of a month-long period during the month of April 2010 the researcher engaged in two main interactions with the law enforcement personnel of the Champaign Police Department. Through in-depth interviews, I sought to determine police attitudes and perceptions about the communities they police. I interviewed two individuals using an informal conversational approach. After the initial interviews and data analysis, where necessary, follow-up interviews will be scheduled via telephone. Typically I will meet with the officers individually for approximately one hour periods of time. Another means of gathering data for the study will be through participating in the everyday interactions with the interviewed officers. As a means of observing the officer’s everyday interactions I will participate in the “Ride-along” program through the Champaign Police Department in order to adequately evaluate the officer’s interactions with the community members.

Following are the methods of data collection used in this study:

1. Conducted extensive research on incidents that the Champaign Police Department had been involved in. This prior background research was done to gain insight into the circumstances in which law enforcement personnel have employed force within a specific marginalized community like the predominantly Black and poor North End community of Champaign, Illinois.
2. Throughout the course of the study law enforcement personnel were studied in their work environment in order to identify some of the elements of their environments that might provide reasons for their use force during their patrol in these communities.
3. Interviews with officers were conducted in order to gain clarity on their field experiences and if there are any discrepancies in how they police different areas of the city as well why those differences exist if it is found that they do. The interview also served to find other sources of increased violence in neighborhoods of marginalized people.

The interviews began with the gathering of background/demographic information to identify the officers. The questions used to obtained this data closely followed the Patton Model for interviewing (Madison, 2005). The Patton Model for interviewing divides interview questions into six sections behavior/experience questions, opinion/value questions, feeling questions, knowledge questions, sensory questions, and background/demographic questions. The Patton Model was ideal for this study because it allowed for easy analysis of the questions asked. This allowed for a better understanding of the interviewees by providing clear perceptual views of the interviewee through the use of opinion/value and feeling questions, and also accounts of the interviewee’s actions through behavior/experience questions. Then, each interviewee was asked a mixture of behavior/experience, opinion/value, and knowledge questions. All of the previously mentioned questions are in accordance with the Patton Model for Interviewing. Follow-up questions were also asked in areas that required further clarification and areas where additional questions furthered understanding and captured the interviewees’ meanings properly.

Once the data collection was complete, it was analyzed using line-by-line interpretations of the interviews and the incorporation of observations found while attending the ride-along with the officer of the Champaign Police Department to paint a “bigger picture” of police and civilian interactions.

**Findings**

During the course of this study it was evident that there are some serious issues with police and community relations. I found a few concerns that could be possible causal factors in the degradation of law enforcement personnel and community relations. Through this study’s investigation the four major factors identified as having a possibly having a causal relationship to the loss of community relations with the police are 1) the lack of cultural understanding on behalf of the Champaign Police Department, 2) partial adherence to community needs, 3) biased sentiment to other officers’ mistakes, 4) and the enforcement of laws that discriminately target certain populations of people.

The first factor that I see as a damaging factor for the Champaign Police Department’s community relations is the lack of cultural understanding amongst the officers of the Department. For instance, while on a ride-along with Officer 1, we stopped a few individuals with the suspicion that they were part of a group of individuals who were going around the community shooting paintball guns at people. Once all of the individuals were searched and there were background checks run on all of the individuals one background check came back and the person in question was on parole. As a result, the officers asked the person if they had any tattoos and if he would remove his hooded sweatshirt so the officers could check. As an observer, I didn’t see this as relevant to their search, but he complied and they found no ink markings. Following the removal of the individual’s hooded sweatshirt, Officer 1 noticed that there was a crown embroidered onto the individual’s shirt. As a result Officer 1 speculated that this individual was affiliated with a particular gang and that the crown sewn onto the shirt was a symbol of the individual’s allegiance to that gang. For me, an individual who is familiar with urban wear from buying it and seeing it in stores it was evident that the crown was just a simple design. Officer 1’s lack of knowledge about urban wear and the culture that it represents made him unable to distinguish between a true gang affiliation which would most likely be airbrushed or screen printed onto a garment. This clear misconception of urban culture leads to false labeling of individuals, which in certain circumstances can lead officers to make false assumptions and demonize individuals who are without fault.

The second factor that leads to the decline of police and community relations is the partial adherence to community needs. Without fully addressing the needs of the community, faith is lost in the police department’s ability and willingness to aid in community endeavors. An example of this was evident in my interview with Officer 2, a ranking officer. During this interview, he mentioned a tactic called “policing by environment” which he felt helped lower the crime in the community. He noted that during various neighborhood meetings community member in the Garden Hills area of the Champaign community complained that they needed lighting in the neighborhood as well as sidewalks to improve the community’s visual appeal. As a result through the “policing by environment” program they erected streetlights along Hedgerow a street that he described as a “major artery” in the community. It was clear that there was some progress but there was no mention of the erection of streetlights throughout the rest of the community or the input of sidewalks in the community.

Biased sentiment towards other officers’ mistakes was the third factor that could be a potential cause in the demise of community and police relations. While in conversation with Officer 1 as we did a walkthrough of a park where suspects were spotted shooting paintball guns, we began conversing about the tragedy involving Kiwane Carrington. In conversation Officer 1, he stated that it was an “unfortunate” event that happened to a good person with whom he spoke with frequently. He also seemed to fault Kiwane in the shooting by stating that “he should have been in school” when it has been clearly noted that school was adjourned for the day during the time of the incident. He then began to speak of scenarios where juveniles may be shot because of things that may look like weapons cause them to be fired upon. This comment seemed irrelevant to the conversation seeing that no report stated that Kiwane was carrying anything that resembled a weapon. Officer 1 also showed remorse for it “happening” to Officer Norbits. Officer 1’s sentiments were shared by the local Fraternal Order of Police who were reported in the local newspaper as calling Norbit’s 30-day suspension over the incident, “unfair” a perspective expressed by Norbits himself in his grievance filed against the City of Champaign (Schenk, 2010). It seems that this officer was showing sentiment for the shooting officer instead of recognizing the mistakes in proper procedure that occurred. These types of responses can form a sort of Us vs. Them complex pitting the community and officers against each other.

The final factor I observed that works against community and police relations is the enforcement of laws that target certain groups of individuals. The instance where I saw this was also during my ride-along with Officer 1. While routinely riding through Officer 1’s patrol area we pulled behind a vehicle that was playing his radio at a high volume. It was evident that this was bothering the officer by his repeated comments on his dislike of the loud music and his statements of protocol to stop individuals whose volume was too loud. As we pulled the individual over I took note of the surroundings and recognized that we were not in a residential area and had not received a complaint due to the music. As a result the individual was cited in what seemed like a situation where no laws were broken. Simple issues such as this can result in distrust of law enforcement after enforcement of a protocol that seemed to neither hurt anyone nor help suppress crime.

**Discussion**

In hindsight, it seems that there is clear evidence that there are major hindrances on police and community relations, specifically in the City of Champaign. Due to various cultural barriers and four key elements limiting the police and cultural relations it is likely that these issues need to be addressed in order to advance relations. More importantly, as long law enforcement remains an intricate part of panoptic societal ruling forcefully coercing all marginalized communities to conform to “normative” white society, they will continue to be met with resistance.

In relation to neighborhood theory, neighborhoods such as the North End of the City of Champaign whose residents are predominantly poor Blacks and Latinos, will continue to solidify and mobilize against the Champaign Police Department in order to defend themselves against future police brutality and mistreatment. The local community mobilized across various lines, i.e. racial, class, gender, community and campus following the tragic death of Kiwane Carrington. This type of mobilization has occurred following police killings of unarmed citizens in other locations across the country as in the case of the Coalition Against Police Abuse or CAPA in Los Angeles, California during the mid-1990s (Vargas, 2006) which organized around the prevention of police violence and citizen harassment, taking their cases to courts in search of justice. This mobilization allows for communities such as Los Angeles where CAPA works and Champaign, Illinois where groups such as the Champaign Urbana Citizens for Peace and Justice (CUCPJ) operate, to make use of the same legal systems that, in some cases, are tools of oppression.

This research was also closely related to and driven by the Foucault’s vision of “plagued” communities which is a societal embodiment of Bentham’s panoptic prison system where marginalized communities become highly surveilled, deviant (Cohen, 2004), ethno racial prison (Wacquant, 2002) from which there is no escape.[[2]](#footnote-2) Those deemed as problem or “plagued” communities such as the North End of Champaign, Illinois are continually harassed by members of the Champaign Police Department in order to force conformity and in essence remove and destroy all traces of these marginalized citizens culture (Smith, 22). With attacks on urban culture, clothing, and police camaraderie targeting the communities youth officers of the Champaign Police Department and those of departments like it continually attempt to strip the culture away from people in these marginalized communities.

Lenin’s 1919 theory of “The State” was also an influential work for this piece that allowed for the shaping of a theoretical framework showing governmental influence as a major coercive force which gives a basis for how and where police draw their attitudes and misinterpretations of the people of marginalized communities. By drawing on influences of the hierarchy which is “The State” local law enforcement agencies aggressively coerce their patrolled communities to take on more of a Eurocentric view of society and culture that support societal inequality and white racial superiority.

Some limitations of this study were that it wasn’t able to draw from both sides, the community and the Police Department, in order to contrast the views of and effects both sides feel that the sort of colonizing policing has on the member of the community. This would have been the ideal situation. There also was the big issue of time constraints where the collection and analysis of the information found was not as thorough as it may have been if this had been a year long course rather a semester long one. There were also some issues with gathering participants in order to interview them. In theory, because of the attacks the Champaign Police Department has received in response to the wrongful death of Kiwane Carrington they have become extremely guarded and are careful not to let too many “outsider’s” into the department in order to stifle bad press.

A delimitation of this project was that I chose to limit my number of interviewees to two instead of the proposed for to five in order to scrutinize the data more carefully and to spend more time with the participants that I procured initially instead of wasting time trying to find more sources. As a result I procured one hour long interview with Officer 2 of the Champaign Police Department and an interview/ride-along with Officer 1, also of the Champaign Police Department, which lasted more than six hours and allowed for a multitude of information outside of the interview questions.

For those who may chose to go forward with such a project in the future, I would suggest that it be a much longer study where more than a few participants are interviewed and more ride-alongs are scheduled in order to get more of a scope of what may go on not only during one shift of a particular individual but multiple.

**Conclusion**

To summarize my study concerning law enforcement was proven to be true of the Champaign, Illinois community. As a result of my research with the members of the Champaign Police Department, I found that there are a few main factors that contribute to the demise of police and community relations. Though there may be more, the four factors I found through this research to be the most prevalent in contributing to decreased community-police relations were: the lack of cultural understanding on behalf of the Champaign Police Department, partial adherence to community needs, biased sentiment to other officers’ mistakes, and the enforcement of laws that target certain populations of people.

Reflecting on my encounters with the officers with whom I came in contact during my research, I feel that the interviews I conducted were a great source of primary information but not the main source. I believe that the ride-along that I participated in with Officer 1 provided more of an eye opening experience to police and community relations. Not only did the in-field experience allow me view the interactions the officers had with the people in the community, but it also allowed me to view firsthand some of the thoughts the officers had of the people with whom they encountered but also the situations that we encountered during the shift.

As far as the topic of community and police relations is concerned I feel that there needs to be much more extensive research done. I believe with more results found pinpointing constraining factors of police and community relations, more pressure will be placed on the government to change policies and force them to place stronger restrictions on the members of their law enforcement agencies. Also it might force officers to become familiar with and immerse themselves in the communities that they police, not only as a colonizing force but truly to protect and serve the people of those particular communities. This would have a tremendous impact on marginalized communities. It seems that it would require changing the mindsets of many but as a result of this research I feel that mindsets aren’t the primary cause for relational issues but the lack of understanding.

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1. Political science Cathy Cohen (2002) argues that instead of communities thought of as ghettos (characterized by its ethnic and class make-up) being characterized as deviant and pathological as social science literature tends to suggest, that the inhabitants of these marginalized spaces are enacting agency in their lives “as they try to secure such human rewards as pleasure, fun, and autonomy” (p. 38) as well as performing acts of resistance to an oppressive dominant culture. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Loic Wacquant (2002) describes the ghetto as a “sociospatial device that enables a dominant status group in an urban setting simultaneously to ostracize and exploit a subordinate group endowed with negative symbolic capital.” Wacquant goes further to say it is “a relation of ethnoracial control and closure built out of four elements: (1) stigma; (ii) constraint; (iii) territorial confinement; and (iv) institutional encasement” (p. 50) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)