

YOUNG BLACK MEN AND URBAN POLICING  
IN THE UNITED STATES

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*People of colour living in disadvantaged urban communities have been shown to be the disproportionate recipients of both proactive policing strategies and various forms of police misconduct. As a consequence, a growing body of research has begun to examine the relationship between blacks' experiences with the police and their perceptions of police legitimacy. While urban minority young men are primary recipients of proactive policing efforts, few studies have examined in depth their particular experiences with the police. Drawing from a broader qualitative study of violence in the lives of African-American youths from a distressed urban community, this paper examines 40 young men's experiences with and perceptions of police harassment and misconduct. Our findings highlight young men's sense of themselves as symbolic assailants in the eyes of the police, suggest the importance of measuring the impact of accumulated negative experiences to better understand minority/police relations, and add additional currency to recent findings on the significance of procedural justice.*

While a large body of research has examined police practices and police/community relations, what is often missing in this literature is a full consideration of minority perspectives on policing (see Phillips and Bowling 2003). In the United States, for example, considerable attention has been paid to the nature of police/suspect encounters, and the situational influences on police decision making. However, the vast majority of these studies focus on factors such as suspect behaviour, event and setting characteristics (see Engel *et al.* 2000; Klinger 1996*a*; Klinger 1996*b*; Lundman 1996; Smith and Visser 1981; Worden and Shephard 1996). Despite the interactionist framework brought to bear in such research (see Reisig *et al.* 2004), only a handful of recent studies move beyond this unidirectional approach to also examine the impact of *police* behaviour on the actions and responses of suspects (see Mastrofski *et al.* 1996; 2002; Terrill 2003). Moreover, very little research has examined police/suspect encounters from the point of view of those suspected and stopped by the police (but see Anderson 1990; Weitzer 2000).

Situational analyses that consider police behaviour have brought three important issues to light. First, the more aggressively or disrespectfully the police behave at the onset of the encounter, the more likely suspects are to resist or be non-compliant (Mastrofski *et al.* 1996; Terrill 2003). Secondly, negative police actions such as disrespect are both ecologically patterned and disproportionately experienced by blacks (Mastrofski *et al.* 2002). Finally, when police behaviour is taken into account, 'males and minority citizens are *more* likely to show compliance' (Mastrofski *et al.* 1996: 289), and the highest rates of compliance are found in white officer/minority citizen encounters (see also Anderson 1990). These findings suggest that the relationship

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between race and suspect demeanour is very much complicated by the way the police interact with members of poor minority communities.

In addition to these situational analyses, a great deal of research has examined the social ecology of policing and the disproportionate effects of police practices and misconduct on African-Americans in the United States (Bass 2001; Meehan and Ponder 2002; Phillips and Smith 2000), and people of colour generally in both the United States and Western Europe (Holdaway 2003; Miller *et al.* 2001; Zauberman and Levy 2003). In the United States, this research documents the wide range of harms to minorities in disadvantaged communities, including disproportionate experiences with surveillance and stops (Browning *et al.* 1994; Fagan and Davies 2000; Hurst *et al.* 2000; Jones-Brown 2000; Kennedy 1997; Weitzer 1999); disrespectful treatment and verbal abuse (Mastrofski *et al.* 2002; Weitzer 1999); arrests (Smith and Visser 1981); the use of force, including excessive and deadly force (Jacobs and O'Brien 1998; Smith and Holmes 2003; Terrill *et al.* 2003; Terrill and Reisig 2003; Weitzer 1999; Worden 1996); police deviance (Kane 2002); as well as fewer police protections and slower response times<sup>1</sup> (Anderson 1999; Klinger 1997; Smith and Klein 1984). Moreover, it is specifically minorities that are young and male who bear the largest share of these negative experiences.

As a consequence, many scholars suggest that the consistent finding of minority distrust and dissatisfaction with the police can best be understood with reference to the nature of policing in their communities, including their interpretations of their own experiences with the police (Anderson 1990; 1999; Fagan and Davies 2000; Leitzel 2001; Sampson and Bartusch 1998; Tyler and Wakslak 2004; Weitzer 2000; Weitzer and Tuch 1999; 2002). However, most research on minority citizens' perceptions of and experiences with the police have focused on adults rather than juveniles, and this work is primarily based on either survey research or official data on citizen complaints. Few studies have drawn from the insights to be gained from in-depth interview techniques, which provide a unique opportunity to examine not just the context and circumstances of events, but also their meanings for the individuals involved (see Anderson 1990; Weitzer 1999; 2000).

A number of scholars have called for this approach as an important means to gain a deeper understanding of minorities' assessments of the police (Brandl *et al.* 1994; Locke 1996). For instance, regardless of whether police behaviour meets legal standards of appropriateness, African-Americans' perceptions of 'unfair, unjust or otherwise unequal treatment from the police' have serious consequences for police/community relations (Brandl *et al.* 2001: 524). Moreover, in-depth interviews allow researchers to make 'central to our understanding the knowledge provided by minority communities themselves' and allow us to attend to their "lived experiences" and subjectivities' (Phillips and Bowling 2003: 270). This is especially necessary for young black males, who are frequently studied as offenders and viewed as potential troublemakers in their communities, but rarely have their own perspectives utilized as a legitimate source of social inquiry.

Here, we provide a contextual examination of urban African-American young men's perceptions of the nature, circumstances and meanings of proactive policing in their everyday lives. Drawing from a larger qualitative study of violence in the lives of

<sup>1</sup> Though seemingly incongruous with findings of over-policing, these problems can coexist. Consider, for instance, variations in police behaviour based on proactive versus reactive approaches (see Weitzer 1999: 832).

black youths from a distressed urban community, we specifically examine young men's accounts of their experiences with police harassment. To provide a deeper understanding of their perceptions of their interactions with the police, we consider their accounts in the context of their discussions and understanding of the nature of policing in their communities. While our study focuses specifically on the experiences of minority youth in the United States, it nonetheless has broader significance: tensions between minority communities and the police are a widespread problem in many Western nations.

*Race and the Social Ecology of Proactive Policing*

Young black men are widely viewed as 'symbolic assailants' in the popular imagination (Quillian and Pager 2001), in the criminal justice system broadly (Bridges and Steen 1998; Kennedy 1997) and among the police specifically (Anderson 1990; Skolnick 1994). This is why minority group threat theories have been particularly successful in explaining police brutality and the use of deadly force (Holmes 2000; Jackson 1997; Jacobs and O'Brien 1998; Smith and Holmes 2003). Such police behaviours are relatively rare. And while attention to these cases is a reflection of their serious nature (see Locke 1996), it is equally important to examine the consequences of more routine aspects of police behaviour, particularly in the era of proactive, aggressive crime-control strategies (Hemmens and Levin 2000). While arguably not causing the grave harms that result from brutality and deadly force, 'getting hassled' by the police (Browning *et al.* 1994) may in fact have more widespread cumulative effects both on individuals and on the collective consciousness of black communities (Feagin 1991).

Researchers have faced a difficult challenge in attempts to disentangle the impact of race from the impact of disadvantaged community context in explaining police practices in the United States, because the urban disadvantage found in the poorest black neighbourhoods is ecologically unmatched (see Sampson and Bartusch 1998; Sampson and Wilson 1995; Weitzer 1999). Though early studies of policing drew from ecological models (see Werthman and Piliavin 1967), renewed attention to the social ecology of policing took hold with Klinger's (1997) ecological theory of police responses to deviance. While Klinger attempted to explain why the police are less responsive to crime and citizen requests in high-crime communities, his work has been extended to explain the social ecology of police misconduct (Kane 2002), including police disrespect (Mastrofski *et al.* 2002) and the use of force (Terrill and Reisig 2003).

This work has expanded our understanding of the impact of race on the perception of young black males as symbolic assailants, to also include recognition of the ecological contamination of 'geographic areas [defined as] suspicious places' (Terrill and Reisig 2003: 294). These 'dangerous' places are consistently found to be areas of concentrated disadvantage with large minority populations. Thus, Terrill and Reisig suggest that if 'officers tend to view minorities as individuals associated with an increased likelihood of violence, it may also be that officers apply a similar, and even more powerful perceptual framework around geographic space' (2003: 308). Notably, some research has also correlated perceptions of dangerous places with high rates of crime (Terrill and Reisig 2003), while other research suggests that this relationship is not so clear-cut and, instead, race and disadvantage have stronger explanatory value than neighbourhood crime (Fagan and Davies 2000; Quillian and Pager 2001).

On some level, determining whether race or economic disadvantage has primacy in explaining aggressive police practices or police misconduct is of limited utility in understanding minority young men's personal experiences with the police. Whether because of their neighbourhood, their race, or some combination, the experience of 'getting hassled' remains a disproportionate burden. For instance, in Mastroski *et al.*'s (2002) examination of police disrespect toward the public, their inclusion of neighbourhood measures of concentrated disadvantage resulted in the surprising finding that whites were significantly more likely to receive disrespect. However, when they compared the rates of disrespect for minorities and whites, they found that minorities were twice as likely to receive disrespect from the police. Thus, they suggest that 'what appears to be an absence of racial disparity in the observed encounters actually transfers racial disparity from an earlier decision stage (mobilization) to a later one' (Mastroski *et al.* 2002: 543).

In fact, scholars have argued that one of the most harmful elements of aggressive policing strategies is their disproportionate targeting of both minority citizens and poor minority communities (Bass 2001; Fagan and Davies 2000; Heymann 2000). As Hemmens and Levin (2000: 473) summarize:

[T]hese more aggressive procedures increase hostility toward the police in inner-city neighborhoods and among those minority groups who are the primary targets of these proactive policing tactics .... [S]uch tactics ... involve the extensive use of police discretion and provide multiple opportunities for the abuse of authority .... One result of these aggressive police tactics is the stopping and questioning of many innocent persons.

For example, in an analysis of policing in New York City, Fagan and Davies (2000) not only found that blacks were stopped five times more often than whites, but also that the ratio of stops to arrests was significantly higher for blacks than whites, suggesting that police stop practices were more indiscriminate for blacks as a result of race-based suspicion.

Other studies have likewise found racial disparities in the experience of being stopped or hassled by the police. In Browning *et al.*'s (1994) survey of Cincinnati adults, 46.6 per cent of blacks described being stopped or watched closely by the police, compared with just 9.6 per cent of whites. Likewise, Weitzer and Tuch's (1999: 498) analysis of Gallup poll data found that while 'few whites said they have been mistreated by the police ... 4 in 10 blacks said they have experienced such mistreatment'. In fact, blacks were over five times as likely to report such experiences. Hurst *et al.*'s (2000) school survey with adolescents found that 41 per cent of the black youth in their sample had been stopped by the police on the streets, compared with 24.8 per cent of white youths.<sup>2</sup> Less than 10 per cent in either group had been arrested.

Browning *et al.* (1994) also measured neighbourhood effects, and found that race remained a significant predictor of police hassling. Likewise, despite Weitzer and Tuch's (1999) introduction of class and other control measures, race remained the strongest predictor of both negative experiences with the police and legal cynicism. Unfortunately, Hurst *et al.* (2000) did not examine the impact of community or neighbourhood context, despite their sampling in both urban and suburban schools in

<sup>2</sup> Hurst and her colleagues also found that black youths reported being stopped in cars more often than white youth, though the difference—about 53 versus 44 per cent—was not as great.

one metropolitan area. Weitzer's (1999) examination of perceptions of police misconduct across three neighbourhoods, however, finds evidence that race and place are both important for understanding African-Americans' negative experiences with the police. Those in the disadvantaged neighbourhood had more negative experiences than their upper-middle-class counterparts, while the latter's negative encounters with the police occurred primarily when they were outside of their own neighbourhoods, and thus were blacks 'out of place' (Weitzer and Tuch 2002: 451; see also Meehan and Ponder 2002).

*Race, Perceptions and Experiences with the Police*

One of the most consistent findings in research on attitudes toward the police is that legal cynicism is much more prevalent among minorities than whites (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Sampson and Bartusch 1998; Webb and Marshall 1995; Weitzer 1999; 2000; 2002; Weitzer and Tuch 2002; but see Frank *et al.* 1996), and this is the case even for black police officers (Barlow and Barlow 2002; Weisburd *et al.* 2000). There is some debate about the role of social class in shaping minority attitudes. For instance, several studies have found stronger negative perceptions of police injustice and disapproval of racial profiling among middle-class and professional African-Americans (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Weitzer and Tuch 2002). On the other hand, Sampson and Bartusch's (1998) analysis found that legal cynicism and dissatisfaction with the police were both strongly correlated with neighbourhood concentrated disadvantage (see also Anderson 1999). In fact, once they controlled for concentrated disadvantage and neighbourhoods' violent crime rates, racial differences in dissatisfaction with the police disappeared in their model (Sampson and Bartusch 1998: 800).

Most of the research on race and perceptions of the police has been based on adult samples, despite the fact that 'juveniles make up a disproportionately large segment of the population subject to police contacts and arrests' (Leiber *et al.* 1998: 152; see also Snyder and Sickmund 1996). The few studies to examine these issues among adolescents suggest that juveniles have less favourable attitudes toward the police than adults, and confirm findings for youth on the relationship between race and attitudes toward the police (Hurst and Frank 2000; Hurst *et al.* 2000; Leiber *et al.* 1998; Taylor *et al.* 2001). For example, in their survey of delinquent youths, Leiber and his colleagues (1998: 169) report that 'minority youths consistently expressed more negative views of the police than did whites, and race/ethnicity was the strongest predictor of perceptions of police fairness and police discrimination'.

A growing body of research also has examined the relationship between perceptions and negative experiences with the police. While Brandl *et al.* (1994) suggest that global attitudes toward the police have a stronger effect on individuals' assessments in specific encounters than the reverse, most studies have found that both negative and involuntary police contacts result in less favourable attitudes toward the police (Decker 1981; Huebner *et al.* 2004; Murty *et al.* 1990; Webb and Marshall 1995). Much of the recent research in this area has specifically examined the issue of racial profiling. Weitzer and Tuch (2002: 445), for example, found that 'net of other factors, race and personal experience with racial profiling are among the strongest and most consistent predictors of attitudes toward the police'. In fact, they conclude that personal experience

with racial discrimination ‘can have lasting, adverse effects’ on individuals’ perceptions of the police (2002: 452).

Likewise, Tyler and Waslak (2004) report that individuals who believe they were the victims of racial profiling have more negative attitudes toward the police. In addition, their work highlights the importance of procedural justice—the process-based criteria by which individuals evaluate whether they were treated fairly. Specifically, they found that when individuals believed that ‘the police exercised their authority using fair procedures ... and [were] respectful [in their] interpersonal treatment’, they were less likely to perceive such stops as racial profiling, even if they were (Tyler and Waslak 2004: 276). They (2004: 278) conclude: ‘To effectively deal with racial distrust of the police in the minority community it is important to regulate not only the selection of the people whom the police stop, but also the manner in which they conduct stops as well.’

With regard to juveniles, Leiber *et al.* (1998) measured police contact by examining the frequency of being warned and released, the frequency of being taken to the police station, and perceptions of being wrongly accused. They report that ‘all of the police contact variables were significant for some type of attitude, and juvenile–police interactions were more effective than the sociocultural variables in explaining different perceptions of police fairness’ (1998: 170). While their study did not explicitly assess whether juveniles believed they were treated respectfully, their findings with regard to evaluations of police fairness in particular suggest that facets of procedural justice are important issues for adolescents (see also Anderson 1990). Jones-Brown’s (2000) survey of black high-school males offers further corroboration. In a suburban, and primarily non-delinquent sample, she found that 91 per cent of young men had been stopped by the police, and more than half reported five or more contacts. Moreover, approximately half of the sample rated these contacts unfavourably, describing the police as disrespectful and physically intrusive, and attributing the stops to racial bias.

Thus, high rates of being targeted by the police, combined with perceptions of unfair and disrespectful treatment, likely have a cumulative effect on urban minority young men’s perceptions of the police. In fact, Feagin’s (1991) examination of racial discrimination specifically highlights the importance of understanding the impact of accumulated discriminatory experiences. Specifically, he notes that blacks face ‘a litany of *daily* large and small events’ (1991: 114), and it is this ‘cumulative impact of racial discrimination [which] accounts for the special way that blacks have of looking at and evaluating’ their experiences in public encounters such as those with the police (1991: 115). Because most research on police/youth interactions has been survey-based, these studies have been unable to fully account for both the lived experience of routine police stops, and the cumulative impact of these encounters. Here, we draw from qualitative interviews and base our investigation on the belief that an improved understanding of the relationship between the police and minority youth can emerge by attending to the perspectives of those who are most likely to experience proactive policing in the United States: urban African-American young men.

#### *Methodology and Study Setting*

Data for this investigation come from a broader study of experiences with violence among urban black adolescents. Here, we draw from survey and in-depth interviews

with 40 African-American young men living in St Louis, Missouri.<sup>3</sup> They range in age from 13 to 19, with a mean age of approximately 16. Interviewing began in spring 1999 and was completed in the spring of 2000. The interviews were voluntary, and respondents were paid \$20 for their participation and were promised strict confidentiality.<sup>4</sup>

Respondents were recruited to participate in the project with the cooperation of several organizations working with both 'at-risk' and delinquent youths. These included one local community agency and two alternative public high schools. Approximately equal numbers of respondents were drawn from each location. The community agency was a neighbourhood-based drop-in centre in north St Louis, where youths from the neighbourhood were free to congregate and socialize. The second author taught a photography class at the centre the summer prior to data collection, was familiar with youths who regularly spent time there, and they were included in the sample. The two alternative schools drew youths from the St Louis public school catchment area, and were specifically designated to serve youths expelled from St Louis public schools for a variety of infractions. The counsellor at each school was asked to identify and approach youths for participation in the study when they were known to reside in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the city.

We narrow our focus here to urban black males because research has identified them as the group for whom involuntary police contacts are most frequent and salient in the United States (Hurst *et al.* 2000). As described earlier, 'racial differences in attitudes toward police have been among the most robust findings in criminal justice research' (Taylor *et al.* 2001: 302). Research has also demonstrated that youths' views of police are less favourable than their adult counterparts (Taylor *et al.* 2001; Hurst *et al.* 2000), and there is some evidence that this is related to the frequency of their contacts with the police (Fine *et al.* 2003; Leiber *et al.* 1998; Snyder and Sickmund 1996). However, limited research has provided an in-depth examination of the nature of African-American young men's contacts with the police, or their perceptions of these encounters. Our research strategy allows us to examine these issues in detail, and to compare the experiences of those not engaged in serious delinquency with active offenders.

St Louis was an ideal setting to conduct the research, both because of its socio-economic character, and because of the style of policing within its disadvantaged neighbourhoods. St Louis typifies the highly distressed urban city in the United States, and includes large concentrations of extreme disadvantage that result in social isolation, limited resources and high crime rates. Table 1 provides census data comparing young men's neighbourhoods, St Louis city and county.<sup>5</sup> As illustrated, young men were drawn from neighbourhoods characterized by intense racial segregation, as well as disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment and female-headed families. These are precisely the ecological contexts researchers have associated with both aggressive policing and police deviance (Fagan and Davies 2000; Kane 2002). Policing strategies in respondents'

<sup>3</sup> The broader study investigates peer and neighbourhood violence, including a primary focus on violence against girls. It includes additional interviews with 35 young women. For more on the study methodology, see Miller and White (2003).

<sup>4</sup> Pseudonyms are used throughout the paper, both for young men and for the streets they occasionally name.

<sup>5</sup> To ensure anonymity, we did not obtain young men's addresses; instead, we asked them to provide the names of two cross streets near to where they lived. Data presented in Table 1 come from census block data from these cross streets. Thus, it is not a precise measure, but does provide a rough match for their neighbourhoods. We were unable to obtain this information for four young men in our sample, because the street names they gave us were parallel. In two of these cases, we were able to obtain census data at the zip-code level. These data are not included in Table 1, though they were comparable to the block level characteristics. One additional note on Table 1: the figures for St Louis county do not include those of the city, as the city is its own county.

TABLE 1 *Select neighbourhood characteristics*

|  | Respondents'<br>neighbourhoods | St Louis<br>City | St Louis<br>County |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Per cent African-American                        | 82.6                           | 51.2             | 18.9               |
| Per cent poverty                                 | 33.8                           | 24.6             | 6.9                |
| Per cent unemployment                            | 18.0                           | 11.3             | 4.6                |
| Per cent female-headed families with<br>children | 43.1                           | 28.8             | 10.7               |

neighbourhoods relied heavily on proactive encounters to address particular problems such as drugs and gangs. This approach involved frequent pedestrian and vehicle stops by district patrol officers and detectives, as well as by members of specialized units and task forces.<sup>6</sup> These strategies were also the basis on which the young men in our study characterized their experiences with the police as often constituting harassment.

Sampling was purposive in nature. Our goal was to interview young men who were at risk or involved in delinquent activities, as these youths would reasonably have more involuntary contact with police. We did not, however, target youths known to have negative experiences with the police or who had expressed bias against them. All of the young men reported having engaged in some form of delinquency in their lifetime. In all, 73 per cent reported having engaged in serious delinquency, while 40 per cent reported involvement in serious delinquency in the last six months.<sup>7</sup> Half of the young men reported having been arrested in the last year, and 65 per cent reported ever having been arrested. Thus, our sample captured variation in both delinquent involvement and official contact with the criminal justice system. This allowed us to examine whether there were differences in young men's perceptions of and experiences with the police based on their own behaviours.<sup>8</sup>

Data collection began with the administration of a survey, and youths were then asked to participate in an audio-taped in-depth interview that was typically completed on the same day. The primary data for this contextual examination come from the in-depth interviews, while the survey interviews provide supplemental data. First, the survey supplied baseline information about youths' overall perceptions of police in their

<sup>6</sup> While the St Louis police department operates under a philosophy that includes recognition of community-oriented policing strategies, in terms of policy, this means that a public affairs officer is assigned to each of the nine police districts and is expected to attend community meetings. In addition, St Louis does not have an external civilian review board to investigate charges of misconduct, though African-American community groups have been pushing for this for a number of years (see <http://stlc.in.missouri.org/alderman/bbDetail.cfm?BBId=384>). Instead, allegations of misconduct are investigated through the department's Internal Affairs Division.

<sup>7</sup> Serious delinquency included the following self-report items: stealing over \$50, stealing a motor vehicle, attacking someone with a weapon or with the intent to seriously hurt them, committing a robbery, selling marijuana or other drugs. In all, 25 per cent of the respondents were current gang members, and eight of these were among those reporting participation in recent serious delinquency. We conceptualize youths as 'at risk' when they reside in disadvantaged, high crime neighborhoods in St Louis and have engaged in at least minor forms of anti-social behaviour but are not involved in ongoing serious delinquency (see Gibbs 1990: 40). Finally, when we refer to youths who have desisted from offending, our specific reference is to those who report having engaged in serious delinquency in their lifetime, but not in the last six months.

<sup>8</sup> One of the initial study goals was to compare 'at risk' and serious delinquent youths with youths who had no involvement in delinquency. Despite nearly two years of effort, we were unable to obtain necessary permissions to gain access to this third comparative group of youths. However, there is evidence to suggest that this group would not have had considerably less police contact. Recall that in Jones-Brown's (2000) survey of 125 mostly non-delinquent black youths, 91 per cent reported having been stopped by the police.



neighbourhoods. Specifically, respondents were asked how often they believed the police: do a good job enforcing laws; respond quickly to calls; work hard to solve crimes in the neighbourhood; are easy to talk to; are polite to people in the neighbourhood; do a good job preventing crime; and harass or mistreat people in the neighbourhood. Responses to these items provided a basis for comparing how our participants' perceptions compare with previous studies of attitudes toward the police. Youths were then asked whether they had been harassed or mistreated by the police, and whether they knew someone who had been harassed or mistreated.

Survey responses were used as a reference point during the in-depth interviews, where primary contextual and perceptual information was collected. Our goal was to collect data that could provide a relatively holistic assessment of youths' experiences with and perceptions of police harassment and mistreatment. The in-depth interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. The young men were reminded of their survey response regarding their experiences with the police (i.e. 'you said before that you/your friend/family member had been harassed or mistreated by the police'), and were asked to provide a detailed description of the circumstances leading up to these events, the events themselves, their consequences and the youths' interpretation of what happened and why. They also were asked to describe and explain their perceptions of the police in their neighbourhoods, and to discuss incidents of negative police experiences they had witnessed or heard about.<sup>9</sup>

In-depth interviewing provided us with a method for understanding the social world from the points of view of the research participants. Rigorous examination of such accounts offers a means of 'arriving at meanings or culturally embedded normative explanations [for behaviour, because they] represent ways in which people organize views of themselves, of others, and of their social worlds' (Orbuch 1997: 455). This approach is particularly important for understanding young men's perceptions of their experiences with the police, because so few studies have examined these issues from the perspective of minority youth (see Phillips and Bowling 2003). Moreover, as several policing scholars have recently argued, citizen's perceptions of police behaviours—regardless of their objective reality or legal parameters—are important to understand because they affect both police/community relations and individual perceptions of the police (see Brandl *et al.* 2001; Weitzer and Tuch 2002). Since efforts to increase police legitimacy are often predicated on the input of community members, our approach—speaking with those individuals most likely to experience involuntary police contact—provides important insights for better understanding the impact of proactive policing strategies on young black males.

In our analysis, we took care to ensure that the concepts developed and illustrations provided typified the most common patterns in youths' accounts. This was achieved using grounded theory methods, including the search for and explication of deviant cases (Strauss 1987). Reliability was strengthened through our triangulated data collection technique, by asking youths about their reports at multiple points across two interviews, and asking for detailed accounts during the in-depth interviews. The study raises significant issues that may guide further inquiries into the relationship between urban minority youth and the police.

<sup>9</sup> Our specific focus in the current paper is youths' *own* experiences with the police. Their experiences with and perceptions of 'vicarious harassment' (see Browning *et al.* 1994) is the subject of a separate analysis.

*Study Findings*

Table 2 shows that the vast majority of young men we spoke with reported having some experience with police harassment. Fully 83 per cent reported being harassed themselves, and more than nine out of ten reported that someone they knew had been harassed or mistreated. In fact, only one young man answered no to both questions. Moreover, though young men who reported involvement in serious delinquency were somewhat more likely to report harassment, a substantial number of non-serious delinquents reported harassment as well. Of the 16 young men who reported engaging in serious delinquency in the last six months, 14 (88 per cent) also reported police harassment, compared with 79 per cent (19 of 24) of young men not reporting recent serious delinquency. Likewise, among those young men reporting never having engaged in serious delinquency, 55 per cent nonetheless reported experiences with police harassment. This pattern holds when comparing young men with and without official juvenile justice contact: of those young men who had been arrested, 88 per cent reported personal experiences with police harassment or mistreatment, as did 71 per cent of non-arrested young men.

Thus, while it could certainly be argued that a substantial number of our respondents were candidates for disproportionate police attention, and were likely known by the police in their communities because of their criminal activities, it is also important to keep in mind that many young men who were not active offenders were likewise subject to such treatment. This includes both young men who had desisted from offending, and those who had never been involved in serious crime. This is not surprising, given research that suggests even non-delinquent African-American young men report high rates of police contact (Fine *et al.* 2003; Jones-Brown 2000). Moreover, as we detail below, those young men involved in serious delinquency based their complaints on the nature of police treatment, rather than on the fact of their being stopped.

Table 3 shows young men's responses to survey items concerning their assessments of the police in their neighbourhoods. Two general issues are notable. Overall, young men's assessments of the police are consistently less positive than those found in general

TABLE 2 *Exposure to police harassment*

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| Harassed or mistreated by the police                            | 33 (83%) |
| Knows someone who has been harassed or mistreated by the police | 37 (93%) |

TABLE 3 *Perceptions of neighbourhood policing*

|   | Often | Sometimes | Almost never |
|---|-------|-----------|--------------|
| The police do a good job enforcing the laws               | 24%   | 42%       | 34%          |
| The police respond quickly to calls                       | 23%   | 31%       | 46%          |
| The police work hard to solve crimes in the neighbourhood | 32%   | 42%       | 26%          |
| The police are easy to talk to                            | 13%   | 21%       | 66%          |
| The police are polite to people in the neighbourhood      | 10%   | 41%       | 49%          |
| The police do a good job preventing crime                 | 13%   | 38%       | 49%          |
| The police harass or mistreat people in the neighbourhood | 47%   | 34%       | 18%          |

surveys of attitudes toward the police. Nonetheless, their responses are not uniformly critical of the police. Instead, young men had somewhat more confidence in facets of policing like law enforcement and crime solving efforts, while they were especially harsh in their evaluations of how the police treat people in the neighbourhood. So, for instance, two-thirds of the young men said the police are almost never easy to talk to, nearly half said the police are almost never polite<sup>10</sup> and a similar number reported that the police often harass and mistreat people in the neighbourhood. On the other hand, less than one in six young men believed the police were easy to talk to, one in ten reported that the police are often polite, and just 18 per cent said the police almost never harass or mistreat people in their communities. In addition, young men had little faith in police crime prevention efforts, perhaps in part because of the extent of crime in their neighbourhoods, or because of their disapproval of the proactive crime control strategies they experienced on a regular basis.

These general evaluations of the police are noteworthy because they corroborate key findings from the in-depth interviews concerning young men's perceptions of their treatment by the police, and their perceptions of the extent and nature of police harassment. To examine these issues further, we now turn to young men's narrative accounts of their personal experiences with harassment and misconduct. Most of their accounts centred on problems related to getting hassled by the police, and emphasized the disrespectful treatment they felt they received at the hands of officers. Many young men were particularly frustrated when they were stopped in situations in which they believed there was no basis for suspicion, and about a quarter of the sample described experiences that went beyond what they believed was harassment, to include police violence or other misconduct. We examine each of these issues, and conclude with a discussion of young men's perceptions of how race and neighbourhood shape their interactions with the police.

### *Just Messin' with Us*

Young men's negative views about the police stemmed largely from proactive policing strategies such as frequent pedestrian and vehicle stops. While they acknowledged that these activities sometimes yielded arrests or seizures, they nonetheless felt that such police practices amounted to routine harassment. William explained that 'if they see us every five minutes go around or in a different part of the neighborhood, they think we selling drugs or something, and they'll stop us like five, six times a day. Just to pat us down and ask questions'. Likewise, Terence observed:

On certain days, [the police] might do a sweep through the neighborhood. They'll come in like, three or four cars deep, two paddy wagons, and they'll just roll down every block that they think mainly sellin' drugs or whatever. And anybody outside, if they think you got something, they gon' check you. Just everybody that happen to be on the block. If you look like you got something or look like you fina do something, so they say, then they just come up to you, tell you to assume the position or whatever. [Tell you to] put your hands on the hood [and they] check you. If you do got something, you in the paddy wagon and they take you downtown. If not, they gon' check you, talk bad to you for a lil' minute and then tell you to go on about your business.

<sup>10</sup> A sizeable minority of young men did express the caveat (recorded in the margins of the survey) that the police were generally polite to young kids in the neighbourhood; see also Freudenbert *et al.* (1999).

Because these sweeps cast a wide net, and because the stops were routine, young men questioned whether the police were really concerned with addressing crime in the neighbourhood, or were merely interested in hassling them. For example, Darnell commented that ‘police over there by me, they stop you just to mess with you for real. That’s what they do. Sometimes they’ll pull up and be like, “get that damn crack out your mouth boy!” and keep going’. This perception that the police just like to ‘mess with’ people may be part of the reason they believed the police did a poor job preventing crime.

Young men understood that certain behaviours and contexts might subject them to increased suspicion by the police. While they acknowledged this reality, they nonetheless found it unfair. Jamal, for instance, described how clothing and money would subject young men to negative police attention: ‘It’s like, because the clothes that the teenagers wear, [police] feel that if you have fancy clothes or you have a lot [of] money, you selling drugs. They can’t see a black male these days having a good job. They always want to pull you over or search you to find something.’ Likewise, Gary noted that ‘they see you out there, black, with gold in your mouth, and they think you out there selling dope or something’.

Ricky described how hanging out on the street with other young men always attracted police attention, regardless of whether anyone in the group was involved in criminal activities: ‘The police will ride up on a group of guys, they’ll get out, they’ll make you lay on the ground, they’ll pull your clothes all off you. Or they make you take your shoes and socks off. I mean, just unnecessary stuff.’ He explained:

It was cold outside and a block up from me ... two blocks up from me it’s like a heroin set, a lil’ heroin area. I mean, the police is, they *real* hot on this area now; I mean, they just out there. And one day I was walkin’ from over there and I walked across the lot and the police came to the corner. He seen me standing out over there. I mean, they know I don’t sell dope, they know I go to school everyday. And I just be standin’ out there ‘cause my cousin live over there and we just be standin’ out[side], you know, might smoke a lil’ weed, you know just stand out there and talk or whatever. Everybody don’t got to be doing the same thing. This what I tried to explain to them: ‘Just ‘cause I’m out here don’t mean I sell dope, man. I mean, every time you check me [you don’t find anything].’ I mean I don’t even carry money no more. Every time they check me. How am I sellin’ dope and I don’t never have no money in my pocket? Check my shoes, make me take my socks off. Man it’s cold outside. ‘Pull your pants down.’ Man, I’m talkin’ about, take your jacket, go all in it ... all types of stuff, man, and it’s freezin’ outside. Make you lay on the ground. To me, that’s police brutality.

As Ricky’s comments suggest, police interactions with young men were not just experienced as invasive, but also were physically intrusive. For instance, a number of young men specifically complained about the police ‘trying to put they hands all in [their] mouth[s]’ when they stopped them.

As Ricky’s account also suggests, young men believed that the police sought to limit their use of public space by designating certain neighbourhood locations as crime hotspots. Shaun noted: ‘... they a trip, we be sitting on the front [porch] or something, they’ll pull up just ‘cause we sitting there. Or we be chillin’ in front of the store, [they] get out checking everybody.’ And Tommie explained:

Right now [the police] sayin’ if you don’t stay on the street you [hanging] on, they could put you off that street [and] tell you to go on [the] street you stay on. They put a new sign up saying this is a

whole new area for [in]tolerance, so if you get caught on the street with anything, you get a extra three years with it. That's what they got put up on the lamppost on the corner.

Other respondents felt that the police were more suspicious of youths they had previous encounters with but had not established legal grounds for arrest. Specifically, they believed that the police, having been unable to 'catch them dirty', used their discretionary powers to retaliate. Robert described such an incident:

I was drivin' and I had my permit, and they pulled me over and I was tellin' 'em I'm going to get some medicine for my girl, she's sick. And they gave me like three tickets. They was just gonna mess with me 'cause they knew me and they knew that I used to be on the drug scene, but you know that I never was the one getting caught.

Kevin described another way in which the police could use their discretionary powers to inconvenience young men they knew were involved in delinquency but hadn't found sufficient evidence to arrest:

We used to be sitting outside, they'll just come out and just, they ain't, they wouldn't like lock us up, they just take all us down to the station or whatever, just have us sitting there for hours and then let us go. They'll take your money and stuff, have to walk home .... It can be cold outside and stuff, they'll do that.

Some young men attempted to reduce their chances of coming under suspicion by avoiding certain places or individuals altogether. For instance, Cooper explained that the police harassed him every day when he used to hang out with certain friends on a suspected drug set:

They pulled up, swooped at the same time. Everybody standing out on the sidewalk, just hanging out. They jumped out the car checking everybody. I don't have time to stand around there anymore. If you do, all they gonna do is call you over so they can see what's in your pocket, see what you got.

However, as described below, such avoidance strategies were sometimes not enough to deter police suspicion. Young men were particularly frustrated by involuntary police contacts when they were engaged in what they felt should obviously be recognized as pro-social activities.

### *Everybody's dirty*

Young men believed that police personnel besieged their neighbourhoods because officers believed that many of the people living there, particularly young black males, were criminally involved. Thus, many felt they were tainted by unilateral suspicion. Some young men did describe situations in which police suspicion of them was legitimate. Aside from specific facets of interactions they found objectionable (see below), young men did not characterize these instances as police harassment. What is important to note, however, is that the practices the police employed in these encounters were often the same as those used when respondents were not breaking the law. Young men were especially resentful of proactive police tactics when they were in what they considered law-abiding contexts. They believed these should have been enough to insulate them from involuntary stops.

For example, Bobby reported that the police stopped him and his friends on their way to school one morning. He explained: '... it was like eight people and we all went

to the same school over on High Street. So we was walking, [the police] talking about they had got called, three cars deep they coming down, talking about, “we hear you all got something to do with drugs, gang relations,” stuff like that.’ Eugene described a similar incident:

I was going to school one time and a cop just swerved, pulled up on me. I’m like, ‘Whoa, what’s up?’ He said I fit a description of some dude that robbed a store. So I’m like, ‘robbed a store where?’ He’s like, ‘way on the southside.’ I am like, ‘I’m on the northside so that don’t got nothin’ to do with me.’ And then they tried to put my hands on the wall, put my hands on the car, you know, frisked me, asked me did I have any weapons or narcotics. I was like, ‘no.’ He said, ‘where you going?’ I’m like, ‘I’m going to school’ and stuff, you know. And then people across the street lookin’. They like, ‘dang, why they stop you?’ I’m like, ‘I don’t know.’

Likewise, Ricky recounted:

Some of the stuff they do. I mean, like throw you down in the dirt, get your clothes dirty, man. And, man, they know, *they know* I don’t do nothin’. I mean, I could be goin’ to school early in the mornin’ and get checked. Comin’ home from school, I get seen with a bookbag, they throwin’ my books all on the ground lookin’ for a blunt or something. All type of stuff, man.

Tyrell described an encounter with the police that occurred while he was walking to his girlfriend’s house:

I was going over to my girlfriend’s house and we was gonna go to the show and it was like 5:45 and I had to walk. The show started at like 6:30 or something like that. I’m trying to get over there ‘cause they gonna leave at 6. And [the police officer] says, ‘take off your shoes, open up your mouth’ all this kinda stuff, ‘take off your shirt.’ I’m like, I’m just walking, didn’t even look like I was doing nothing, you know what I’m saying? Had on nice clothes and everything. [He] had me get on the ground, getting all dirty, I was mad as a motherfucker that day.

Tyrell was upset because he was late for the movie and his good clothes were soiled. But he was especially angry because not only was he not engaged in any behaviour he deemed to be suspicious, but he believed that the police officer should have recognized his respectable attire as an indication of his law-abiding status. His reaction is very much in keeping with middle-class African-Americans’ responses to racial profiling. Symbols of legitimacy or affluence are not sufficient to counter police suspicion, and in some contexts may heighten it (Weitzer and Tuch 2002). Much like Tyrell’s efforts to call attention to his attire and behaviour, though with considerably more cultural capital, Weitzer (1999: 833) found that middle-class blacks stopped by the police ‘make a point of displaying middle-class status symbols in self-presentations’ in order to signal their legitimacy.

An additional frustration in situations such as this was the officers’ lack of acknowledgement of the young men’s innocence, even when no evidence was found. Young men complained that in these situations, officers often expressed that they merely ‘got lucky this time’, rather than considering that the young man was not involved in illegal activities. Andrew explained:

One day I was going to my aunt’s house, I had just came from the house and [the police] had pulled in front of me, stopped they car, cut it off and everything. They both jumped out and I’m looking like ‘God, what’d I do?’ They got to patting me down saying where did I just come from and I tell them

where I came from, and they was still saying they think I came from over on Freemont [Street] doing something. I don't know what happened over there, they never did tell me. So they get to patting me down and I kept jumping back like 'what did I do?' and then they wouldn't say nothing. So they kept trying to pat me and I kept jumping back and they was like, 'what's your name?' And I told 'em my name, gave them my information about me. I didn't have nothing to hide so. They was like 'well we gonna be watching you and we gonna keep our eye on you 'cause we don't want you doing nothing stupid and if you do something stupid we gonna get you.'

Such seemingly unilateral suspicion had harmful effects on young men's interactions with the police. As with Andrew's reaction of repeatedly 'jumping back like "what did I do?"', young men were more likely to challenge the legitimacy of police actions during encounters where they considered the suspicion to be undeserved. Respondents believed that officers responded harshly to having their authority questioned, and used these incidents as a justification for getting even at a later date. For instance, Terence said that after he grew tired of being stopped, questioned and searched repeatedly by the same officers, he finally told them: "man, if you'll ain't got nothing on me, then you don't need to be talkin' to me." [The officers] were like, "alright, alright, we see you like to be smart, we'll catch you later."

#### *Showing no respect*

While young men objected to the overall treatment they received by the police, they especially disliked the way officers spoke to them. For example, they noted that police officers routinely used antagonistic language, engaging in name-calling, cursing and derogatory remarks. Cooper remarked that 'they need to change the way they talk to people'. Ricky concurred that 'they'll talk bad, call you all types of punks and sissies, and say you don't wanna be nothing and you ain't gon' be nothing'. And Terence explained:

They'll tell you to come over to 'em or whatever, they be [like], 'get yo' ass over here,' or something like that. 'You look like you got something.' Before they even search you, they'll just start tellin' you what they think about you, 'you look like you got something on you, come here so I can search you,' or whatever. 'Put yo' hands on the hood, lil' boy.' Or, 'look what we got here.' Stuff like that, just lil' smart comments and stuff.

While officers of different races reportedly used these tactics, young men stated that white officers were more likely to incorporate racial slurs and epithets. For example, Cooper said the police act 'ignorant. They show us no respect. Like they grill us, [call us] niggers and all that'. Likewise, Antwoin explained: 'Last year, me and my brother, we was coming through the alley, right, and my brother, we be saggin' [our pants] and the police will roll up on us [and] think we in a gang. Talking like, "come here you black bastards. Bring your asses over here." Stuff like that. They be cursing us out and stuff.' And Tony described when an officer 'called me out [of] my name. I was whistling down the street to tell my friend to bring my bike back, and [the officer] told me, "shut up whistling, you black monkey."'

Similar to Mastrofski *et al.*'s (1996) and Terrill's (2003) findings, aggressive or degrading police behaviour could lead young men to respond in kind. A few respondents reported that they countered by exchanging insults with the officers in these situations.

However, a number of young men pointed out that this had the potential to escalate the situation to more serious forms of abuse. Kenny noted that ‘they’ll be like cussin’ us out and stuff and like tell us to shut up and stuff, and they be cussin’ us out so we cuss them back out and they’ll grab us. And they like push us around’. Likewise, Tyrell said that ‘if you get smart with ’em, that’s when they gonna wanna, you know what I’m saying, beat you up for real. So I just leave it alone’. Leon surmised that ‘sometimes they want you to say something smart so they can lock you up’. And Eric remarked that ‘they be threatening me. They’ll bring me on the side, tell me if they catch me slippin’ at night they gonna break my legs and run up in my house, do something to my peoples’.

Young men were also frustrated that when the police were mistaken about their involvement in crime, they seldom apologized. For instance, Tyrell complained that ‘you be on the ground, they like, “you got any warrants?” After they check you, then they [ask] “what’s your name?” Then they’ll be like, “alright, get up,” and then they get in their car and pull off, don’t even say nothing else’. Further, police often refused to answer specific questions regarding what led to their suspicion. When they did provide an answer, they usually offered that the target fit some vague description of someone wanted for a recent crime, as was the case with Andrew’s and Eugene’s accounts described earlier. Terence recounted a similar incident, with the officers he complained earlier about for repeated harassment:

They said they was lookin’ for a suspect and I fit the description, like they always say. But they ain’t do nothin’ but roll up on me. Told me to put my hands on the hood. They stepped back, looked at me, [then one of the officers] talked on the radio for about two or three minutes. And then he came and searched me [and said], ‘alright, you can go.’ And that was about it.

Thus, young men’s complaints about police harassment were not just about being stopped on a regular basis, but were also systematically tied to their sense that officers refused to treat them with dignity and respect (see also Mastrofski *et al.* 2002; Tyler and Wakslak 2004).

### *Doing Us Dirty*

In the previous section, we described young men’s frustration with involuntary police contacts. Discussions of these incidents as harassment were systematic and widespread in respondents’ accounts. In addition, just over half of the young men in our sample (21 of 40) also described incidents of police misconduct, including the use of violence and evidence tampering. While they were more likely to describe these incidents occurring to friends or family, ten young men—or a quarter of our sample—also recounted personal experiences with such events. Young men believed that the widespread presumption of guilt toward adolescent males in their communities served as a convenient justification for inappropriate police behaviour. In addition, they suggested that the police were more inclined to break the rules themselves when dealing with those they believed to be lawbreakers. Travis’s comments illustrate young men’s perceptions of what they called ‘dirty cops’, highlighting what they saw as a continuum of more and less extreme forms of police misconduct:

It’s a few dirty cops everywhere you go, but we got like two of ’em. They ain’t dirty to where they so dirty they jus’ put something on you and give you a case. They dirty to where like ‘aw, you gonna smart



mouth me?’ and they hit you in the stomach or something like that. [They] never do nothing to really, literally straight hurt you.

The most common forms of misconduct reported were physical assaults, including pushing, shoving, punching, kicking and the use of mace—and planting or tampering with evidence. There were also a handful of allegations of other forms of misconduct, such as theft and dropping suspects in potentially dangerous rival neighbourhoods. In this section, we examine young men’s perceptions of and experiences with these forms of police misconduct.

### *Beating us up*

As Travis’s comments above suggest, young men seemed to regard physical abuse at the hands of the police as an expected consequence of living in their neighbourhoods. Ricky noted: ‘I been thrown on the ground, I been kicked [laughs], I been choked, man I could go on forever.’ Tyrell concurred: ‘I know people getting beat up by the police all the time.’ And Lamont explained that ‘sometimes they’ll beat you up and let you go. Sometimes they’ll beat you up and take you to jail’. Travis explained how an undercover officer who incorrectly believed he was concealing drugs choked him in an attempt to recover evidence:

I was standing on the corner and we got these police we call the jump out boys. They the police [that be] riding them regular cars and look like regular people. They like ‘what you doing on this corner?’ And I’m just steady talking to ‘em and they thought I had some dope in my mouth. So this one cop grabbed me and just started squeezing [my throat]. I was coughing and spitting up stuff and I’m like ‘what you all doing this for?’ and they kept on like ‘don’t swallow it son.’ I’m like ‘swallow? I ain’t got no dope!’ I opened up my mouth after they let go. I was showing them and everything. I mean that’s they job to make sure dope isn’t on the street but I mean I don’t think it is their job to literally squeeze someone’s Adam’s apple.

Just as young men reported that law-abiding status did not insulate them from aggressive policing strategies, they likewise believed it did not protect them from physical abuse. Ricky described an incident in which an officer approached him aggressively, and the situation escalated to a beating:

[One time] I got jumped at [the mall] by the police. He walked up to me, right. Well me and my girlfriend, her brother and his girlfriend was at the show. We was leavin’ the show, right, and we was standin’ at the MetroLink [subway] like where you buy your ticket at .... And we standing out there lookin’ at the time and we thinkin’ like, well should we go see another movie ‘fore y’all go home and I don’t know what caused him to do what he did. I mean, I don’t know how he felt disrespected, he came to me like, ‘he just told you to move.’ He all in my face and pushin’ me back. I’m like, ‘oh, I’m sorry brother,’ you see what I’m sayin’. I’m like, ‘ain’t nobody just tell me to move,’ you know. And then he like, ‘aw well I’m tellin’ you to move.’ I’m like, ‘how you gon’ come to me like that? What you talkin’ to me like that for?’ and he like, he sayin’ something like, ‘you lil’ bastards always ...’ something as we was walkin’ off. And I’m gon’ be honest, I called him an Uncle Tom.

At this point, the situation escalated as more officers came to the scene:

He walked over to me and was like, ‘you ain’t goin’ nowhere now,’ and he grabbed me. He grabbed me around my neck and slammed me on the ground, and another police [officer] came over there

with a shock stick and put his foot on me and he hit me with a shock stick. And then *another* came and hit me and then *another* one came and hit me. And all the time, my girlfriend and her brother watchin' this, right, and a lot of other people seein' this goin' on, right. After he handcuffed me and he sat me up, he punched me in my head .... I was cussin' the man out so bad [at that point].

As we described earlier, young men felt particular outrage when they were accosted in situations that did not carry contextual suspicion. While Ricky complained about police harassment of him on the streets, he also recognized that they were doing their jobs, and 'can only go on what they see'. The incident at the mall especially angered him because he was not in a suspicious context. Moreover, it was a black officer, whom Ricky was initially respectful toward, but who was nonetheless both disrespectful and physically aggressive toward Ricky from the onset. He continued:

I mean, I was dressed real nice. I didn't have on no tennis shoes. I had on some like, khaki pants, a button up shirt. I mean, we was just standin' out there ... lookin' at the time and debatin' when the last MetroLink came and when the next show started .... I don't know what his problem was though. I guess he was already mad or something, I ain't sure. I mean, I don't disrespect grown people. You can ask anybody I've ever lived around. I don't disrespect police or grown people in no form or fashion.

Several young men also described police use of force when they were caught engaged in illegal activities. Kevin described an incident that didn't involve overt force but, nonetheless, caused him physical harm:

One time they had, it was about eight of us all in one backseat with handcuffs on. They just had us stuffed up back there. I had bruises all up my wrist and stuff, messed up my wrist .... Cut one of my veins, it was real tight ... 'cause the handcuffs, they had like when you move, they get tight and stuff. And it was real tight and against like one of my veins and I was moving and it cut me and I was bleeding and stuff.

Most often, these tactics were used when the officers sought evidence in an investigation. For example, Wayne described being roughed up by the police after they saw him throw something after spotting them:

I was real young at the time, I was twelve years old. I learned a lot from that mistake I made. I was carrying a pistol for somebody. It was about twelve o'clock in the morning. I was walking up an alley and I'd seen [the police] ride past the alley first and I tossed the gun or whatever. And they came back up the alley. They pretty much threatened me that they would lock me up for something I didn't do if I didn't tell them what it was [that I threw] .... So I was saying, 'I didn't throw nothing, I didn't throw nothing.' And they like, 'we know you threw something,' and holding my arms real hard, like cramping them up a little bit. They're like 'we know you threw something.' .... [Then] he kind of like pushed me down on the car, put the cuffs on me like pretty rough, but not beating me or nothing like that.

Frank described a more serious beating that took place after he and another suspect refused to tell the police where their accomplices in an auto theft were hiding:

[The police] was like 'where the rest of 'em at, where the rest of 'em?' I'm like 'where the rest of who at?' They like, 'oh you wanna play?' [The] Po-Po, white police hit the reverse, he drives out to the dark, stops and pow, pow, pow, pow, got to hittin' hard, he hittin' us with a stick, hurting us. [I'm like,] 'dang, I don't know where anybody at.' He like, 'you lying.' Pow, hit me again in my face. Next thing I know I'm just going to sleep. I wake up in a little cell, like up in the county [jail] cell.

*Putting a case on us*

While young men were angered and frustrated by police violence, they were also concerned about incidents of evidence tampering. We received fewer reports of such incidents, but they were notable nonetheless, because young men recognized that convictions based on such evidence could have long-term life consequences. Most of the situations young men described that involved evidence tampering involved illegal substances. While there were a couple of descriptions of police planting narcotics where none existed, young men primarily described the police ‘putting a case on’ them when officers charged them with possession based on contraband they found nearby. For example, Bobby noted that ‘if [the police] don’t find nothing, they get real mad and they like plant or put something on you. If they see a bag [used] for drugs a couple feet away from you, they’ll try to put some drugs or something on you’.

Gary described a situation in which the police arrested him for drug possession after finding no illegal substances on his person. He explained:

I was walking to the store with another friend from the neighborhood. Police pulled me over, went to the house and got my mother. My mother asked them what they had me for and they said they was just running my name for some warrants. She went back down to her house you know, I thought they was gonna let me go ‘cause I don’t have no priors or nothing you know. ‘Cause my record’s clean, I don’t have no warrants and then when she came back down there they said that I had drugs. They went in the back of [a nearby] house and found drugs.

The presumption of guilt was believed to drive police actions. For example, young men reported that the police gave them drug cases in retaliation for running from them. They believed the police viewed running away as confirmation of guilt. Wayne explained that ‘all police ain’t good police. You ain’t even gotta be doing nothing. If they think you doing something, they get out [of their cars. And if] they can’t catch you, next time they see you, they put something on you’. However, young men’s decisions to run from the police were not simply to avoid detection for illegal activities, but often were linked specifically to their expectations of police behaviour. Ricky explained:

[The police] have to do they job. But if they wasn’t as hard as they was on us, it wouldn’t really be a problem. I mean, we know how they gonna treat us when they come up. So usually when we see ‘em we run. We already know what they gonna do. So usually it just make somebody run, whether they got drugs or not, weapons or not. It’s just how they treat people, you know. They treat you like, over there, like you not even human. I mean talk to you *bad* bad.

Likewise, the absence of contraband, especially where narcotics were concerned, was not viewed as evidence of the young man’s innocence, but rather of his cunning. Maurice explained that ‘if you ain’t got no proof of where your money coming from, then they automatically suspect that it’s drug money and they take as much as you got. It don’t matter if you say “I got that for a birthday present,” they still can take it. That’s messed up’. Of course, in some instances, young men were involved in illegal activities. But they nonetheless felt that, as law enforcement, the police should behave according to the law.

In addition to instances in which the police were reported to have taken money off suspected drug dealers, several young men also described officers illegally or improperly

handling evidence. For example, Kevin noted that ‘some police like when they pull you over and you got drugs on you, instead of locking you up they’ll just take it, put it in their pocket or something’. He went on to explain how an officer failed to properly handle evidence that was recovered during a stop and search:

The police eventually caught on to us and they rode up on us one time and I had a bunch of sacks in my pocket. I threw them under the steps and my friend had emptied a blunt right there, and the police was going through the little blunt stuff and they found my weed. They asked whose it was, didn’t nobody say nuttin’, the police officer just put it in his pocket. And when the other officer found a gun on my friend, he called for backup. When [backup] came, he told him about the gun, but he ain’t tell him about the weed or anything. I think he took it home and smoked it or sold it himself.

The incidents described in this section—of violence and evidence tampering—represent cases that go beyond claims of routine harassment, to include more serious allegations of police misconduct. While a sizeable proportion of our sample included young men involved in delinquency, and only a quarter reported personal experiences of this kind, these behaviours by the police further undermined their legitimacy in the eyes of our respondents. Moreover, such police actions also targeted young men who were not involved in delinquency, both at the time of the incident and in general. In the final section, we examine young men’s perceptions of the role of race and place in shaping their negative experiences with the police.

### *Is It a Black Thang?*

As our discussion thus far suggests, the young men in our study felt that the majority of police officers in their neighbourhoods treated them poorly. Asked whether they saw differences in their treatment at the hands of white versus black officers, for the most part they did not. Instead, they held broad negative views of the police, regardless of race. Jermaine noted, for instance: ‘I don’t like none of ’em. They all the same. I just don’t like the police.’ Maurice concurred that ‘cops is for cops. A cop is a cop’. And Lamont noted that ‘they [all] crooked. I mean, they try to do anything [to lock you up]’. As these comments suggest, young men came to expect poor treatment by all police officers.

This is not to suggest that race didn’t matter in their discussions. As Ricky’s earlier ‘Uncle Tom’ comment—used on a black police officer who rebuffed his attempt for race-based recognition (‘I’m sorry brother’) and instead treated him as a criminal—suggests, despite their expectation of poor treatment, young men viewed abusive treatment by black officers as treasonous, and thus especially egregious. Describing an incident in which he saw two officers physically abuse a neighbourhood resident, Frank explained that ‘they grabbed him, threw the dude on the car and maced him. He couldn’t see nothing [and then the officers] got to punching him, slamming his head against the car, boom, boom, boom’. He noted that ‘to make it so bad, it was two black cops who did it’.

In some cases, young men also believed that black officers were more likely to mistreat them when white officers were present.<sup>11</sup> James described such an incident:

<sup>11</sup> Of course, there are other factors that can account for the behavioural differences youths perceived. For example, research has shown that officers are more likely to use violence, be disrespectful and make arrests when their colleagues are present (Locke 1996; Mastrofski *et al.* 2002; Smith and Visser 1981).

A white officer pulled us over and gave my friend a ticket for driving without a license and he said that he could've locked him up. But [instead] he talked to him and gave him a ticket to sign. Then the black officer pulled up and said, 'if it was me, I'd take ya'll niggas to jail. Matter of fact, I'm gonna search the car. I hope you say no so I can lock you up and tow the car away so we can tear it apart.' I'm like, 'ain't nothing in there, go ahead and search it.' [The black officer] searched the car 'bout four or five times but didn't find nuttin'. The white cop was like, 'well I already gave 'em a ticket so they can go.' [The black] cop was like, 'you should lock 'em up anyway [and] make 'em walk, if it was me—and ya'll better be glad it wasn't me—otherwise [your friend] would be locked up and ya'll would be walking.'

On the other hand, some young men also suggested that they stood a better chance of establishing rapport with black officers, even though they too sometimes mistreated them. Jamal noted: 'African American police officers, some of them cool. If you know them and if they've been around you for a while.' Likewise, Kevin explained:

Black officers do the same thing white officers do. Sometimes when the black officers lock you up, they'll talk to you or something, tell you why they locked you up and tell you different things. Like they'll say the only reason [they] became officers was because they saw too many black males dying. Then the white officers, when they lock you up they just lock you up.

While respondents believed that officers' status as police officers typically took precedent over their racial identity, they felt strongly that their *own* race had much to do with their poor treatment. Maurice perceived the police in his neighbourhood to be extremely 'crooked', but explained that he believed it was middle-class whites who benefited from their corruption:

[My neighborhood], they got some crooked cops, that's where most of the crooked cops at .... You [referring to the interviewer, a white male Ph.D. student] go to [the neighbourhood] jail and watch. I bet you ... if I'm rich and I go to [that] jail and I say, 'here, I'll give you about five G's if you let me out today,' [for you] they'll do it. I'm black, you know what I'm saying, if I'm black and it's a white cop, they ain't gonna do it. If I'm black, it don't matter if I'm black and it's a black cop, he probably still ain't gonna do it. But if you went there and you say, 'here, here go five G's, let me out,' he'll probably do it. 'Cause they don't think you'll be [criminal]. Look how you look, and look how I look, you know what I'm saying. I got braids, you got glasses, your hair cut low, I got long hair. Your ears ain't pierced, I got earrings, you know what I'm saying. Who you think they gonna let out of jail first? They gonna let you out ... but you could be a mass murderer, you know what I'm saying, you could be killing people, on a killing spree .... I can just be, you know what I'm saying, they can have me in there for the wrong thing, you never know. I can be in there for speeding, you know what I'm saying, that be my first ticket I ever got.

Eugene described an incident in which he was riding with his mother and his brother's girlfriend to the grocery store. His brother's girlfriend, who was white, was driving. The police stopped the car because one of the windows was busted out:

When they pulled us over, I am like, 'whoa was you speeding or something?' [Then] the cops [said], 'get out the car,' so I thought they told her to get out ... [but] they gon' tell *me* to get out. So I'm like, 'for what?' And then, I'm like, 'this don't make no sense.' And my mom like, 'what he do, what he do?' and stuff. They wouldn't tell me what I did.... I reacted calmly, 'cause I ain't never had no warrants or records on me so it didn't matter. But I had to get kinda like, you know, offended 'cause I thought like, 'cause it was two white cops too. So I'm like, two white cops, the person that was driving

was white, why they ain't pull her out, asking for her driver's license and stuff? But they pulled *me* out and asking [for] *my* ID and stuff. You know, I couldn't understand it. I'm like, dawg .... Asked me if I have anything on me.

Young men also believed that their socio-economic status and neighbourhood contributed to police treatment. Specifically, they believed that it was the combination of being black and living in a distressed neighbourhood that put them at greater risk for abuse. For example, Gary highlighted the differences in police enforcement strategies between his neighbourhood and a nearby gentrified white community in the city:

People in the Central West End, shit, they jog and run in morning time, you hear me, at one and three in the morning. So why you in my neighborhood harassing me 'cause I'm walking down the street? Telling me I don't need to be out that time of night. Do you tell them they don't need to be out that time of night walking they dogs and stuff like that?

Moreover, young men did not feel that people outside of their communities were subject to the same scrutiny, even when they came into the neighbourhood for illegal purposes. For instance, Kevin observed:

White people from the county come down here and you wouldn't even know they dope fiends 'less you live down here 'cause they don't look like it, they have fancy cars and jewelry and all that stuff. It's a lot of 'em white, rich people from all out in the county where people think everything good and stuff. They come down here just like poor black dope fiends, they come down buying dope and stuff. Police don't stop them for no drugs. But if I'm standing outside and waiting on the bus or something they'll come up to me and stop me or something and ask me what I'm doing and where I'm going. If I was a little white boy or something with a book bag or something, [the police wouldn't] stop me and search my book bag. They'll probably think I'm going to school or something. I got white friends and stuff and [the police] don't really do nuttin' to them. They sell drugs and everything just like everybody else do. But you ain't hardly never hear about the police messin' with them. Only time they do mess with 'em is when they see 'em with a bunch of black people 'cause police'll think well, what is he doing with them?

Consistent with research findings on the complex relationship between race and place, then, young men also believed that their treatment by the police was multi-faceted, intimately tied to their status as young men in disadvantaged communities, but nonetheless ultimately, inescapably, about race.

### *Discussion*

Two findings are consistent within research on minorities and the police in the United States. First, African-Americans—both adult and juvenile—report more dissatisfaction with and distrust of the police than other groups. Secondly, blacks disproportionately report 'getting hassled' by the police, and disproportionately experience a range of additional negative police actions. Recent research has examined the relationship between perceptions and experiences, but has primarily been based on surveys with adults. The current study extends these findings by focusing specifically, and qualitatively, on the experiences of urban African-American young men—a group routinely at the receiving end of aggressive crime control efforts. Specifically, we compare the experiences of young men involved in those types of offending typically the target of proactive

policing strategies with those who were not. Our goal was to offer a contextual examination of their perceptions of the nature, circumstances and meanings of proactive policing in their everyday lives. Moreover, by sampling young men from extremely disadvantaged communities, our study provides insights into young men's perceptions of both race and place in shaping their experiences with the police.

Much attention has been paid to extreme cases of police misconduct, including brutality and the excess use of deadly force (Jacobs and O'Brien 1998; Smith and Holmes 2003; Terrill and Reisig 2003), and recent research suggests that knowledge of these events shapes minorities' perceptions of the police (Weitzer 2002). While our analyses include young men's accounts of police violence, theft and evidence tampering, the current study draws attention to the importance of understanding the harmful effects of more routine aspects of police behaviour for police/minority relations. Complaints of persistent harassment and disrespectful treatment were the most widespread in our interviews, and came from *both* delinquent and non-delinquent young men. These youths described repeated instances of being verbally abused by officers' use of antagonistic language, name-calling, profanity and derogatory remarks; and also protested against the physically invasive nature of police stops, including public cavity and strip searches.

While these kinds of behaviours are much harder for police administrators to identify, investigate, substantiate and control (Walker *et al.* 2000), they nonetheless appear to have a serious and cumulative impact on young men's perceptions of the police. The combination of frequent involuntary police contact coupled with what young men felt to be poor treatment during such contacts created an accumulated body of lived experiences that shaped young men's perceptions of the police. These cumulative experiences must be understood to fully grasp the nature of conflicts between minority communities and the police (see Feagin 1991). Thus far, survey research has been unable to capture such complexities. Though our qualitative investigation is not broadly generalizable, it provides an important window into the accrued and harmful experience of being young black men at the receiving end of aggressive policing strategies, and offers further evidence of the need to 'produce a more nuanced understanding of minority experiences' (Phillips and Bowling 2003: 280).

Police actions in disadvantaged urban communities are different from those operating in middle- and upper-class neighbourhoods (Kane 2002; Klinger 1997; Mastrofski *et al.* 2002; Terrill and Reisig 2003; Werthman and Piliavin 1967). Research on the social ecology of policing has led to a better understanding of variations in law enforcement strategies across geographic areas. Drug and gang suppression efforts are often focused on the streets of inner-city neighbourhoods, and thus disproportionately impact urban minority young men (see Bass 2001). The visibility associated with such illegal activities makes aggressive police tactics more palatable to some community residents and serves to justify their continued use among police administrators.

However, the process of distinguishing between law-abiding and law-violating community residents is imperfect, and is made all the more difficult by the perceptual frameworks officers bring to their interactions with residents of ecologically 'contaminated' places (Terrill and Reisig 2003). As a consequence, many of those residing in distressed urban neighbourhoods believe themselves subject to heavy-handed policing practices, and for no one is this more the case than young minority males. Recall that more than half of the young men in our sample with *no* history of serious offending nonetheless reported negative experiences with the police. Perhaps as important,

young men who had desisted from offending believed they could not escape their delinquent pasts, even when they thought the police were fully aware of their changed behaviour.

Our respondents believed strongly that the police besieged their communities because officers assumed that many living there, particularly the young black men, were criminally involved. Regardless of their involvement in delinquency, young men felt themselves to be tainted by a kind of unilateral suspicion, which they tied most explicitly to their race, but also to their presence in public neighbourhood spaces, their peer associations, their manner of dress and their previous contacts with the police. Moreover, our research suggests that young men believed that despite their best efforts, they were not able to convincingly present themselves as law-abiding, even when they were, due to the confounding influences of race and place in the creation of symbolic assailants. As a consequence, young men were particularly angered both by police stops in situations they believed clearly invoked signs of legitimacy, and by what they believed was the assumption that they 'got lucky' rather than were innocent when the police failed to locate evidence of misconduct.

Despite the tensions that existed between them, most young men nonetheless believed that the police had an important role to play in improving their communities, and did occasionally speak positively of officers who treated them with respect or expressed some regard for their well-being. Thus, our research suggests that young men recognized the need for a different kind of policing than they routinely experienced. Our respondents' neighbourhoods did not appear to suffer from the under-policing found in other research on disadvantaged communities (see Kennedy 1997). Rather, the potential benefits of crime control measures were jeopardized by what young men perceived to be heavy-handed law enforcement initiatives which targeted young black men seemingly indiscriminately. Regardless of whether the police were acting in accordance with the law, young men's experience of their interactions as harassment had consequences for their perceptions of police legitimacy.

These findings highlight the importance of procedural justice—the process-based criteria individuals draw upon to determine whether they are treated fairly. Young men's complaints of aggressive and discourteous treatment during routine encounters illustrate that it is not only *who* is policed, but *how* they are policed that matters in establishing the credibility of police officers in minority communities. When the police are believed to have exercised their authority fairly, and treated suspects respectfully, minorities are less likely to attribute a racially biased motive to their stops (Tyler and Waslak 2004). Young men's perceptions of the indiscriminate nature of stops contributed to their sense of injustice, but even more significant was what they experienced as disrespectful treatment during those stops. For example, young men actively involved in serious offending did not define police stops of them, in and of themselves, as harassment. Instead, they took issue with that they saw as hostile and purposively degrading treatment during such encounters. Likewise with more serious allegations of police misconduct: young men believed that the police resorted to violence and other forms of misconduct when they believed they were dealing with law violators. Such activities undermined the legitimacy of the police, regardless of whether they occasionally yielded short-term benefits in the apprehension of offenders.

Police often rely on the citizenry in the performance of their duties, and community residents are more likely to cooperate when they view the police positively and with



legitimacy (Decker 1981). Because people of colour comprise a sizeable portion of victims and witnesses, such citizens' distrust of the police can only thwart crime control efforts in their communities. Attempts to remedy this situation must come from police agencies themselves. As formal organizations, they have mechanisms in place to create and enforce policies that can improve police/community relations (see Chevigny 1995; Mastrofski *et al.* 2002). In contrast, disadvantaged communities where tensions with the police are at their greatest typically lack both the social and political capital and the collective efficacy necessary to effectively take actions for change (Sampson *et al.* 2002).

Our findings are consistent with previous research documenting the relationship between negative, involuntary police contacts and unfavourable attitudes toward the police. However, our sample and methodological approach have allowed us to provide a clearer understanding of the nuances of young black men's first-hand experiences of policing, and their interpretations of these interactions. Future research will benefit from additional attention to the cumulative impact of such experiences, how these shape minorities' understanding of procedural justice, and what these groups believe procedurally just policing would look like in their communities. Such an approach will allow us to more fully assess the impact of proactive policing strategies in disadvantaged communities, their effects on minority perceptions of the police, and provide insights to promote social change.

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