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“I’m afraid of cops:” black protesters’ and residents’ perceptions of policing in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Proactive policing strategies produce a wide range of harms to African Americans. Research on attitudes towards police show that citizen distrust is more widespread among Blacks than Whites. However, we know less about how gender intersects with race and neighborhood context in determining whether and why Black people fear the police. Here, I build from the insights of previous research by providing a contextual examination of the gendered nature of fear of the police among Black protesters and residents of Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. Drawing from a larger qualitative study of race, policing, and protests following Michael Brown’s and Freddie Gray’s deaths, I examine 155 Black men’s and women’s accounts of why they do or do not fear the police. Policy implications are discussed, along with concrete recommendations for reducing anti-Black racism in police policy and practice.

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It is well documented that the relationship between Black people and the police has been contentious throughout American history. From the very beginning of American society, the police, first in the form of slave patrols (which were charged with capturing, terrorizing, and returning runaway slaves), and later in the form of official police departments, have historically engaged in racially biased policing and enforced unjust laws (Bass, 2001a, 2001b). As a result of police officers’ long history of violence and aggression toward Black people, Blacks are more likely than Whites and Latinx to have negative encounters with the police (Brunson, 2007; Cobbina, 2019; Russell-Brown, 2009), which drives their attitudes toward law enforcement (Boyles, 2015; Weitzer & Tuch, 2005).

However, important gaps remain in our understanding of the nature of attitudes toward the police. First, most studies focus their examination of

police-civilian relations on Black males and their treatment by the police. Fewer have paid specific attention to how gender intersects with race and neighborhood context in determining whether and why Black women fear the police. However, evidence suggests that the outcome of police-civilian encounters is shaped by gender (Cobbina, Conteh, & Emrich, 2019). Second, while previous research has documented that Black people distrust the police, few studies explore whether and why Black people fear the police. This is surprising because fear is an emotion that can influence attitudes and behaviors (Tannenbaum et al., 2015). While “police forces are a visible branch of state authority legally entrusted to protect society and maintain order by force when deemed necessary” (Roche & Oberwittler, 2018, p. 3), police use of deadly force, violence, and aggression against unarmed minority civilians does little to instill confidence in the police among Black people and may leave them uncertain as to what to expect when confronted by law enforcement officials. Consequently, fear of the police can exacerbate distrust between Black civilians and law enforcement authorities.

Against the backdrop of high-profile police killings that garnered national media attention, this study analyzes the accounts of Black protesters and Ferguson and Baltimore residents’ perceptions of the police. Drawing from in-depth interviews, the present study investigates whether and why Ferguson and Baltimore residents and protesters fear the police. Specifically, this study examines whether there are key similarities and differences among Black men’s and women’s perceptions of police.

Race, gender, neighborhood characteristics, and perceptions of the police

A large body of literature on attitudes toward police shows that citizen distrust is more prevalent among Blacks than Whites (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Weitzer & Tuch, 2002). Research examining the relationship between civilians’ perceptions and the context of interactions with law enforcement suggests that unfavorable views of the police result from negative police encounters (Boyles, 2015; Brunson, 2007; Cobbina, 2019). Personal contact with the police is a central factor that drives attitudes toward the police. Blacks are more likely to experience police-initiated contact than Whites (Harris, 1999), and negative (involuntary and voluntary) police-initiated contact, by its very nature, generally results in unfavorable views (Huebner, Schafer, & Bynum, 2004; Webb & Marshall, 1995). According to Weitzer and Tuch (2002), “net of other factors, race and personal experience with racial profiling are among the strongest and most consistent of attitudes toward the police” (p. 445). In other words, direct experiences with racial discrimination can have enduring detrimental effects on people’s perception of law enforcement (Weitzer & Tuch, 2002).

In addition, police actions are ecologically patterned. Considerable research shows that African Americans reside in areas with the most concentrated disadvantage (Massey, 1995; Massey & Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1996). Large urban Black communities remain highly segregated, endure high levels of poverty, and face extreme racial isolation (Massey & Fischer, 2000). Thus, it is not surprising that crime takes place in these areas, as criminal activity thrives in areas faced with economic, social, and political isolation (Massey, 1995). It is within these enclaves where the relationship between police and civilians is at its worst, as “[t]he intensity of poverty, crime, and general disorder in the locale affects the amount, type, and quality of policing that citizens receive” (Brunson & Gau, 2015, p. 219).

Aggressive order maintenance police strategies are disproportionately concentrated in economically distressed neighborhoods (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). The US National Academies’ Committee on Proactive Policing (Natl. Acad. Sci. Eng. Med. 2018, p. 1) defines proactive policing as referring to “all policing strategies that have as one of their goals the prevention or reduction of crime and disorder and that are not reactive in terms of focusing primarily on uncovering ongoing crime or on investigating or responding to crimes once they have occurred.” Although such efforts are designed to control crime, policies focused on proactive intervention extend a historical pattern of racialized criminalization in the use of police stops, searches, and force (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014; Jones-Brown, Gill, & Trone, 2010; Terrill & Reisig, 2003). This, in turn, shapes attitudinal responses often fueling resentment toward law enforcement (Rios, Prieto, & Ibarra, 2020). Because police practices vary by geographical location, the over-representation of Black individuals among the urban poor means that this group is more likely to experience the harsh enforcement styles of policing practiced in impoverished, disorganized, and high-crime neighborhoods (Anderson 1999; Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b). Diverse experiences among individuals who reside in distressed areas include greater levels of being watched and detained (Jones-Brown, 2000), racially profiled (Weitzer & Tuch, 2005), searched and arrested (Epp, Maynard-Moody, & Haider-Markel, 2014), officer misconduct (Brunson, 2007), slower response time and less police services (Anderson, 1999), becoming the recipient of physical and deadly force (Brunson, 2007; Cobbina, 2019; Terrill & Reisig, 2003), and perceptions that police in general treat people differently based on race (Brunson, 2007; Cobbina, 2019).

Even though direct personal encounters with police shape attitudes toward law enforcement, research shows that vicarious experiences – secondhand information from other people or the media – also play a role. Vicarious encounters affect views of the police. For example, in their examination of the effects police experiences have on perceptions of the police, Rosenbaum, Schuck, Costello, Hawkins, and Ring (2005) found

that vicarious interactions had an impact on attitudes toward police, and this was greater for Blacks than Whites. They also found that Blacks and Latinos were more likely to learn about adverse vicarious experiences with the police primarily through family, friends, and neighbors while Whites were more likely to receive such reports through the media. Evidence also reveals that high profile media cases of police violence increase minorities' distrust of the police (Weitzer, 2002). Yet, few studies have examined whether distrust in the police translates to fear of police.

While many studies have explored the role of race and policing, most have focused on the negative police interactions involving Black men (Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006a; Jones-Brown, 2007). Even though scholars have increasingly examined the plight of Black women in the criminal legal system (Collins, 2000; Jones, 2010), only a few studies examine the perceptions of and experiences that Black women have with the police. For instance, in her book, *Arrested Justice*, Beth Richie (2012) called attention to the plight of Black women, as their social location left them socially stigmatized and increasingly susceptible to male violence and criminalization. She revealed how reluctant Black women are to call police in cases of intimate partner violence because police and the rest of the legal system are focused on using criminalization to manage family crises in ways that are ultimately harmful instead of providing them with resources and tools to overcome these crises. Likewise, in her book, *Invisible No More*, Andrea Ritchie (2017) highlights the various forms of police violence with women of color, as well as how race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability shape the expression of police brutality.

A few studies have compared the experiences of Black women and men regarding the interactions with law enforcement. Brunson and Miller (2006b) underscored police-initiated involvement they had with police, which was characterized by disrespectful, combative, and hostile treatment. On the other hand, Black women frequently reported police harassment due to violation of curfew, and at times, were subject to police sexual violence. Contrary to young men, young women held that the role of the police is to protect and serve community residents and respond to victims of crime. Moreover, in their examination of how Black men and women respond to police encounters, Cobbina et al. (2019) found that the strategies civilians employed are common across both genders (i.e., question police, comply, combination of questioning and complying); however, the police-civilian outcome is demonstrably shaped by gender. That is, Black men were more likely to be recipients of arrests, incarceration, and police violence than their female counterparts. However, Black women who did not acquiesce to the instructions of law enforcement were either free to go or received a ticket for a traffic violation.

Despite these studies, what is absent from much of the research is consideration of whether and to what extent fear of the police is gendered. Specifically, we know little about how gender intersects with race and place in shaping Black people's expectations of law enforcement and the nature of police/civilian interactions. Below, I examine the extent to which Black Ferguson and Baltimore residents and protesters fear the police and whether there are key similarities and variations among Black men's and women's emotional reactions toward law enforcement.

Methods

Data for this study hail from a larger study of neighborhood violence and policing. The current investigation is based on qualitative in-depth interviews with 155 Black protesters and residents of Ferguson, Missouri and Baltimore, Maryland. Interviews were conducted in October and November 2014 in Ferguson and in July 2015 in Baltimore. Prior to the beginning of each interview, the research team¹ outlined the study objectives, obtained informed consent, assured confidentiality, and guaranteed respondents that they would be compensated \$40 for their participation.

Sampling was purposive in nature. Using a maximum variation sampling strategy, the goal was to capture a wide range of varying perspectives regarding the police. Effort was made to target a heterogeneous sample of protesters and residents of Ferguson and Baltimore across race, gender, and age, which yielded a nonprobability sample. Youth were recruited to participate in the project if they lived in Ferguson/Baltimore or engaged in some form of community action (e.g., protests, marches, rallies, etc.) following Michael Brown's and Freddie Gray's deaths. Several different approaches were used to recruit participants. First, effort was made to purposefully recruit from locations where young people were present, as many protests in both Ferguson and Baltimore originated from younger activists. As a result, a flyer describing the research project was placed on my Facebook and Twitter accounts and dispersed to social justice and activist networks that were active on social media. Second, the project announcement was shared with prominent city community members with affiliations in churches, community colleges, and universities and with both newly established and long-standing citizen-led grassroots initiatives. Third, to reach Ferguson's and Baltimore's older demographic, flyers were posted and distributed at the local public library and an advertisement was placed in the employment section of a local newspaper serving the Black community.

Data collection began with a brief survey, which collected demographic information. This was followed by a digitally recorded in-depth interview

where primary contextual and perceptual information was collected. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Respondents were asked to describe their reaction to the news about the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, and what had been happening in their city. This was followed by asking respondents their perceptions of how police handled the outcry from members in the community. They were then asked to discuss positive and negative interactions they had with local police before and after the deaths of Brown and Gray. They were questioned about whether they were afraid of police and their reasons for having such perceptions. The current study draws from responses to the latter question.

Interviews lasted approximately one hour. Interviews were conducted in several locations across the Greater St. Louis and Baltimore metropolitan area, including in a conference room at a local university and public library, in fast food restaurants, coffee shops, and a private office in a church. All interviews were transcribed verbatim and serve as the primary data.

Black people are the focus here because research has identified them as the group that is most likely to experience involuntary police contacts (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Few studies have offered an in-depth examination of the nature of Black women's perceptions of and experiences with the police (but see Brunson & Miller, 2006a, 2006b; Richie, 2012; Ritchie, 2017) and how that shapes fear of the police. This study allows for a detailed examination of these issues with Black men and women. The interviews explore their perceptions of the police and their direct and indirect experiences with officers.

To begin the analysis, all relevant data were sorted into a dataset, which included respondents' response to whether they feared the police. Inductive analytic techniques were used to identify common themes. That is, effort was made to ensure that the concepts developed and described below typify the most common patterns in respondents' accounts. This determination was achieved using grounded theory methods, including the search for and examination of outlier cases (Strauss, 1987). In addition, comparisons were made to search for potential differences across gender and place.

Table 1. Select neighborhood characteristics.

| | Ferguson | St. Louis County | Baltimore | Baltimore County |
|--|----------|------------------|-----------|------------------|
| Population Size | 21,203 | 998,883 | 621,849 | 805,029 |
| Median Family Income ^a | \$40,660 | \$59,520 | \$41,819 | \$66,940 |
| Percent Black | 67.4 | 23.3 | 63.7 | 26.1 |
| Female-headed Families w/ Children ^b | 15.3 | 7.6 | 11.3 | 7.6 |
| Percent Poverty | 22.7 | 9.6 | 24.2 | 9.8 |
| Percent Unemployment ^b | 8.0 | 5.4 | 8.6 | 5.0 |

Source: US Census, 2010.

Study setting

Table 1 provides a comparison of demographic and socioeconomic indicators for residents in Ferguson and Baltimore with their surrounding counties. Two thirds of the population in both cities are Black compared to 23 and 26 percent of the population in St. Louis County and Baltimore County, respectively. Ferguson and Baltimore are characterized by high rates of female-headed households and unemployment, which exceeds those residing in the county. The proportion of poverty is two times greater in both Ferguson and Baltimore City than in St. Louis County and Baltimore County. Residents of Ferguson have a median income nearly \$20,000 less than those residing in St. Louis County. Likewise, Baltimore residents have a median income \$25,000 less than those living in Baltimore County. Overall, individuals residing in the cities of Ferguson and Baltimore fare worse on several socioeconomic indicators when compared to individuals living in St. Louis County and Baltimore County.

Findings

Table 2 provides a basic description of the sample. This study included 155 Black protesters from Baltimore and Ferguson. The Ferguson sample included 87 protesters (43 males and 44 females). These respondents ranged in age from 18 to 74, with a mean age of 36 years. As it relates to educational status, the modal category was some college; that is, respondents were currently in college or had taken some college coursework. Most of the respondents reported being employed either part- or full-time ($N=55$) at the time of the interview. Regarding place of residence, 57 reported living in Ferguson for an average of 9 years. The rest resided in the broader St. Louis area for an average of 16 years.

The Baltimore sample included 68 protesters (27 males and 41 females). Respondents ranged in age from 19 to 86, with a mean age of 46 years. In terms of educational status, most completed a high school diploma/GED. As it relates to economic standing, 40 were unemployed while the remainder reported part- or full-time employment. In terms of place of residence, 65 were from Baltimore and lived in the city for an average of 11 years. Only 3 Baltimore protesters reported residing outside of the city, with an average residence length of 6 years.

Of the 155 participants in the study, there were five cases of missing data. The qualitative analysis as to whether Black people fear the police was based on the valid responses to questions about why people may or may not fear law enforcement; that is, 150 Black participants explained why they personally were or were not afraid of the police.

Table 2. Demographics characteristics of protesters (N = 155)

| | Baltimore N = 68 | Ferguson N = 87 |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Gender</i> | | |
| Male | 27 | 43 |
| Female | 41 | 44 |
| <i>Age</i> | | |
| Mean | 46 | 36 |
| Range | 19-86 | 18-74 |
| <i>Education*</i> | | |
| Some elementary | 10 | 1 |
| Some high school | 6 | 4 |
| High school diploma/GED | 26 | 21 |
| Some college | 9 | 43 |
| Associate/Bachelor degree | 7 | 13 |
| Graduate degree | 10 | 4 |
| <i>Economic standing</i> | | |
| Unemployed | 40 | 32 |
| Part/Full time | 28 | 55 |
| <i>Residence</i> | | |
| Baltimore | 65 | |
| Non-Baltimore | 3 | |
| Ferguson | | 57 |
| St. Louis area | | 30 |
| <i>Years in residence (Mean)**</i> | | |
| Baltimore | 11 | |
| Non-Baltimore | 6 | |
| Ferguson | | 9 |
| St. Louis area | | 16 |

Source: US Census, 2010.

*Data missing for one person in Ferguson.

**Data missing for two people in Baltimore; three people in Ferguson.

Afraid of the police

In the current study, one-quarter (N=40) of the participants stated they were afraid of law enforcement. Of those who feared the police, twice as many women (N=27) as men (N=13) reported such fear. Those from Ferguson (N=32) were much more likely to report being afraid of the police than those from Baltimore (N=8). The common reasons given include police intimidation, previous direct negative experiences with police, and being afraid of mistreatment.

Police intimidation

One-third of those who feared the police expressed feeling a level of intimidation from law enforcement. An equivalent number of men (N=6) and women (N=7) expressed such sentiments with most from Ferguson (N=10) instead of Baltimore (N=3). Some Ferguson residents perceived that they were stereotyped by officers who viewed them as suspicious and “criminal” because of their race. Javon stated he feared being shot by the police because “I speak my mind ... [the police] don’t like me, and I’m a young Black

male.” And Latoya feared that “I will be targeted because of my demographic.” This was tied to geographic location, as poor neighborhoods were more likely to be heavily policed. Baltimore resident, Donald, explained:

Certain spots like, you know, [police can] pick you up and search you, you know in a heartbeat [But] you can go to some part of like on the Westside, you know like where there [are] real quiet neighborhoods, you know. You can walk down the street with maybe a pound of cocaine and whatnot and the police wouldn't even stop and question you or nothing. But on this side [of town] you walk in ... they're going to pick you up and search you, pat you down.

Likewise, asked if he was afraid of the police, Ferguson resident, Marquis, asserted: “Sometimes you are. Like, I would rather stay at home because this area right here is Normandy So you drive through here and Ferguson ... and you feel intimidation. If anything is wrong with your vehicle or something, they will find a reason to give you a ticket.” And Dyshelle asserted, after having been stopped while traveling in a predominately White neighborhood, “I felt like I was pushed into the stereotype of Black people here in St. Louis.” These accounts coincide with reports from the Department of Justice that the Ferguson Police Department and courts engaged in a pattern of unconstitutional police and court practices that was aimed at Black residents (DOJ, 2015). The DOJ's report concluded that police officers functioned as street-level enforcers for policies that used fines and fees to extract resources from poor communities of color and deliver them to municipal coffers. These practices were aggressively promoted by city officials.

Negative direct and indirect experiences with police

Of those who feared the police, 30 percent (N=12), all of whom were from Ferguson except one, reported that they were afraid of police because they had experienced unfavorable encounters with them. Women (N=10) were more likely than men (N=2) to report prior negative encounters, which led them to fear the police. In fact, at times, participants in the study called the police for protection *but* they ended up arrested or harmed by the police. Isabelle, a Ferguson resident, asserted: “One time I did call [the police] on my ex-husband and I got arrested because I had a warrant. I did have a traffic warrant.” And Crystal, a resident of Ferguson, explained a retaliatory incident she faced after calling the police for help:

[B]ack in 2011 one morning I was on my way to work ... and there was a pit bull that was always loose I called the police department ... [a]nd they said, “Well, we'll send somebody out.” So as I'm getting ready for work, I'm looking out the window and I see the dog across the street, and I see the police drive past So I called back and I said, “The police officer that just drove down the street didn't see the dog.” I said, “It was a woman too.” I said, “I don't think you all should send a woman here to even be bothered with this pit bull So as I was getting

ready, I heard a knock on the door, and they came to the door. And I said, “Yeah, the dog was across the street.” And they said, “We’re not here for the dog. You have a warrant. You’re under arrest.”

After finding out she was jailed for having been stopped a few years ago for an issue pertaining to her car muffler, Crystal lamented, “It was something so minor and so petty.” She later learned what happened when she confronted the officer while being booked in jail:

I said, “I called about a dog ... [b]ecause the pound told me to call the police department.” And the lady [police officer] said, “Well maybe if they would have sent a man out first, maybe you wouldn’t be here.” And I said, “Oh, I get it. I get it. So apparently you must have got offended.” And she said, “I’m not saying nothing” It killed my spirit from that point on ...where I don’t even want to call [the police] for anything.

The retaliatory action by the police toward Crystal ultimately colored her view of law enforcement for the worst. Likewise, Rosalind from Ferguson, remarked: “I called the police one time [because] I had a dispute with a neighbor and they just came to fight, they didn’t come to ask questions. Knocked at my door, just grabbed me out the house ... [and] I was beat up by the police.”

While some experienced police violence and misconduct after having initiated contact to receive help, others were subject to involuntary police contacts. Justin, a resident of Baltimore, explained that while walking down the street in his neighborhood with a friend and his wife:

I heard the police again say, “get on the ground.” And I’m looking back, and saying, “he’s not really talking to me is he?” And so I stopped. He said, “if I tell you to get on the ground again, I’m going to shoot you in the back.” A White policeman. I said, “okay. He’s talking to me.” So, I stopped. I’ve never been through this. So, he’s like “get on the ground” I got on my knees like, and just like that down on my knees, like, “okay, like this.” And he says, “no, get on the ground.” So I’m like, “what do you mean?” He said, “get on the ground.” It’s like, it came to me. Get. On. The ground [He said] “if I tell you again, I’m going to shoot you in your back.” So I got on the ground, completely. Stretched out, it was cold, it was wintertime, I’ll never forget.

Justin and his friends were arrested for drinking beer in public, which they refuted, and were released 36 hours later without he or his friends being charged. It is worth noting that even if Justin and his friends consumed an alcoholic beverage in public, such an act is an infraction to be punishable by fine. It certainly is not worth being shot at by an officer. It is that threat of extreme force for a minor infraction, which caused Justin to fear the police more generally.

Moreover, it was not uncommon for Black men and women to be viewed with suspicion and find themselves the targets of racial profiling. Dysshelle explained that while traveling in a predominately White, affluent

neighborhood in St. Louis, she was pulled over because “I had tints on my windows, it was an ‘04 Taurus, a pretty big car I was going past [the police and] she made a U-turn and pulled behind me She told me and my friend to get out of the car and set us on the curb in a busy intersection.” When asked why she was stopped, the officer responded, “I smelt marijuana.” Dyshelle was upset because not only was it impossible for the officer to smell drugs in her car since they were both in their vehicles but “I don’t smoke marijuana [and] I don’t let nobody smoke marijuana in my car [Yet, the officer called] two other cop cars and dogs and everything.... It was embarrassing.” Dyshelle was especially upset because not only was she not engaging in any behavior deemed to be suspicious, but she believed that she was racially profiled because she was Black and had tints on her car windows.

While some had directly experienced unfavorable treatment from police, others witnessed abusive treatment by officers. Ferguson resident Shaniqua said that she feared the police because “on many occasions [I’m] riding past, I’ll be like ‘oh my God, why that police got him on the ground?’ And then they always have to put their foot in the back of your neck. What is all that for? To me, the police just use excessive force.” As a result, Justin from Baltimore admitted, “I’m afraid of what [the police] might do.” This fear is steeped in the fact that police represent the state who are called to protect and serve. But as *Ebony* noted, the police are “the law [so] what can you say? Because it’s usually their word against yours.”

Afraid of mistreatment from police

Of those who feared the police, 23 percent (N=9), all who were from Ferguson except one, narrated that they were afraid of police mistreating them. Such statements were commonly made by Black women (N=7) rather than men (N=2).² There was a sense among some Black women residing in Ferguson that they would be treated unfairly when they encounter officers. For example, Leonetta stated: “it’s not a fair situation that you’re in with the police. I mean, you never know what’s going to happen or how it’s going to go down. So yes, I am afraid of the police.” And Shaniqua asserted, “I’m afraid of them more so than them helping me.” When asked why that was the case, she explained:

[J]ust say if me and somebody was into it ... and I called the police. Then the police come. Then he might come with an attitude for something that happened on his other call. And then, especially if it’s me and a White person, then I know nine times out of ten, I’m going to be totally in the wrong to him. And then ain’t no telling how he might act. The next thing I know, I’m slammed on the ground or any of that. And that’s one of my fears. I hope to God the police never have to slam me on the ground because I see the way they slam people on the ground.

And some viewed the police as corrupt individuals who engage in wrongdoing. Rosalind said she was afraid of the police because “of the way they come, their attitude, [and] ... the things that they do. They place drugs on people in my community.” As a result, Arlene remarked that even though “I have no warrants [and] I’ve never had any ... I would run before I would ask them for help.” With the high-profile police killings of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and countless other Black individuals, some had a fear of being murdered by law enforcement. Javon acknowledged, “I’m not really afraid of [the police]. The only thing I’m afraid of is probably one of them catching me on the back street and killing me ... that they could do me like they did Mike Brown.” It is worth noting that while Javon states that he’s not afraid of the police, he expounds on being fearful that he could end up killed by law enforcement. No doubt, the killing of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson coupled with the fact that Wilson was not charged for Brown’s death left Javon concerned that he could become a victim of police violence. For some, fear of the police is driven by their unpredictable and unreliable nature, which, in turn, left many stressed about the outcome of potential police interactions.

Not afraid of police

While some Black adults in the sample reported being afraid of the police, the majority reported not being fearful of law enforcement. In particular, of the 150 responses, 73% (N=110) said they were not afraid of the police. An even distribution of response to this question was found, as 51 percent (N=56) of men reported not being afraid compared to 49 percent (N=54) of women. However, Baltimore residents were more likely than Ferguson residents to say that they did not fear the police. Specifically, of the 110 respondents who reported not being afraid of the police, 54 percent (N=59) were from Baltimore and 46 percent (N=51) were from Ferguson.³

While the vast majority of respondents stated that they were not afraid of the police, their explanation for not being afraid varied. For example, the most common reasons given include police are human, respondents follow the law, they know how to behave if stopped by police, and they remain hyper-aware of police.

Police are “human just like me”

Of those respondents who were not afraid of the police, 28 percent (N=31) reported that police were human just like them, which was evenly split among Ferguson (N=15) and Baltimore (N=16) residents. Specifically, 61 percent (N=19) of men and 39 percent of women (N=12) emphasized

the humanity of officers. Nekeisha from Ferguson asserted, “I’m not afraid of police officers because they’re human just like me, they bleed just like I bleed. They put their pants on one leg at a time everyday just like I do They’re no gods, so I don’t fear them. I would never fear them.” For some, they feared no one but God. Ferguson resident Keanu explained:

First, being spiritual, I don’t fear anyone but God Himself. If you mean I understand what they can do, what some of them can do – because what they think they can do as far as the law is concerned and how the law backs them up as far as me getting hurt and them accusing me of doing something, I fear that. As far as what they can do on paper. But as far as a man concerned, I don’t fear them at all.

While he reported not fearing anyone but God, Keanu did admit having concerns as to what the police could potentially do. His focus was not on a generalized fear of police officers themselves but a reasonable perception of becoming the recipient of police injury and having a system that backs the behavior of state officials if he is accused of a crime by the police.

Others reported not being fearful of anyone. Keston, a resident of Ferguson, stated, “I’m not afraid of the police ... because they’re human just like I am. I am not afraid of any man.” Some made a conscious decision not to live in fear despite being confronted with the reality that there were reasons to be apprehensive of the police. Nia, from Ferguson, noted that “my ego won’t allow me to say that I’m afraid of the police.... I can’t walk on this earth allowing myself to be fearful of that.” Notwithstanding, she admitted, “I am afraid for us as a community because of what happens with the police. I’m afraid for my African American son because of what they can do, and what they have done, and the reasons why they do it.” Yet even still, Nia refused “to teach my son to live” in fear of the police. In a similar vein, Jerry, who resided in Baltimore, explained: “I’m not afraid of police. But that’s a decision. I think fear is a decision you know. I’m not afraid. I’ve decided not to be afraid of the police. But that does not erase the reality that I have to fear the police.” As a visible branch of state authority in which police act with relative impunity, some Black people realized they have much to fear. Yet, despite the larger pattern of police violence depicted throughout the nation, some Black men and women actively chose not to live in fear of the police.

Obey the law

Another common theme reported among those who said they were not afraid of the police was they were not involved in crime. Specifically, 18 percent (N=20) of respondents felt they had no reason to fear the police because they obey the law. This sentiment was slightly more

common among men (N = 12) than women (N = 8) and common among both Ferguson (N = 9) and Baltimore (N = 11) residents in the sample. Perhaps not surprising, most believed that if they followed the law, then there was no reason to fear law enforcement. Of his perceptions of the police, Alex from Baltimore said, “I don’t do nothing wrong to like affiliate myself with them wanting to bother me ... [so] I have no fear of them.” When asked why she is not afraid of police, Ranisha, from Baltimore, said point blank “because I’m an upstanding citizen.” Reginald, a Ferguson resident, explained: “I don’t pose a threat beyond my race and ethnicity, so I have nothing to be fearful of If I haven’t done anything that justifies police to take action on me, I don’t feel like I have anything to worry about.” Reginald’s point is illustrative, as his statement indicates that he’s well aware that his race alone can warrant suspicion from the police. Yet, even with that, he believed that prosocial behavior would not evoke attention of the police while criminal behavior would do so.

In fact, a few Baltimore residents discussed having a criminal past and their efforts to stay on the straight and narrow path precluded them from being apprehensive of law enforcement. Eddie, admitted that “when I was into drugs and stuff ... I used to [avoid police].” But now he states he is not fearful of the officers because “I try not to do anything where the law is going to even have to come into my life.” Similarly, speaking of his criminal past, Jeffrey asserted, “I’m not living like I used to live ... So [I am] not afraid of them.” Overall, many found solace in the belief that operating within the boundaries of the law would prevent them from encountering law enforcement; thus, they did not fear them.

Know how to act when confronted by police

Although many assumed that they would not be targeted by police because of their compliance with the law, they also believed that should they encounter law enforcement they know how to behave. In particular, 13 percent (N = 14) of people from Ferguson and Baltimore reported not being afraid of the police because they remained aware of how to comport themselves when they interact with officers. Specifically, 64 percent (N = 9) of men and 36 percent (N = 5) of women made such statements. Respecting state officials was commonly reported among participants for not being fearful of them. Asked if she was afraid of the police, Ferguson resident Nekeisha responded, “I’m not afraid of anyone. I respect the police and I will continue to respect them.” In a similar fashion, Dennis, a Baltimore resident, lives by the principal that “an answer when mild turns away rage.” He explained how his reactions have ultimately shaped interactions with the police:

I was driving my car and I didn't know my license was expired because I had tickets I didn't pay and I was stopped. And the first thing the police told me when he stopped me after he had checked my ID and everything. He said, "I'm going to write here that you are very cooperative." He said, "I'm going to put that you did not give me any resistance, didn't give me any problem at all." He said, "I'm going to make sure I put that here in the report." So that, you know basically has been my whole experience with the police.

As a result, Dennis' interactions with the police have been positive because according to him, "the way I answer them, the way I talk to them it's respectful." Likewise, Clayton, a resident of Ferguson, understood his response to encounters with officers could shape police-civilian outcomes, as he asserted: "I'm not going to do something where it's going to risk my life or something like that." If stopped by the police, he said, "I can be calm, chill, keep my composure and be respectful and leave after that." Extant literature document that civilian response to police can shape the outcome of police-civilian interactions (Cobbina et al., 2019).

While Black men and women both emphasized the need to be respectful, some men in the sample underscored the need to be particularly deferential toward the police when stopped. Omar from Baltimore asserted that he was not afraid of police because "I'm articulate enough to address them and speak in a professional manner, so there's no way they're going to intimidate me." Likewise, Malik, a resident of Ferguson, asserted that if stopped by police it is important to "know how to phrase your words ... [and say] 'yes sir, no sir' ... [to] make this ordeal [end]." In a similar vein, Darius, a resident of Baltimore, claimed, "I wouldn't say I'm afraid, but I have to act a certain way to the police." When asked to clarify, he responded, "I've got to turn on my proper voice and [say] 'yes sir, no sir, yes ma'am, no ma'am,' and all that other sh*t." Though he understood how to negotiate police encounters, Darius was quite resentful about having to resort to such mannerism because "I don't say that on a regular basis so why would I say it to an officer?" Some, like Darius, felt it was necessary to subscribe to a social code of behavioral conduct to neutralize the presumption of guilt and/or threat that officers may associate with young Black individuals.

A few women also noted the need to silence their voice in order to avoid escalating a police encounter. Kayla, a Baltimore resident, noted that with "me being humble ... I know how to keep my mouth closed and keep my thoughts to myself" when interacting with the police. Similarly, Edith, a resident of Baltimore, asserted that in the aftermath of Freddie Gray's death, "it makes me think of how to respond to [police]." She continued: "[I need] to be more humble for fear that I might just be one that they slang or twist on. There is a fear now of how do I respond to

them. If I let them know I know my rights, will that be accepted, or will they disregard that and punish me for knowing my rights?" Both Edith and Kayla spoke about the need to be humble as well as silence one's voice as a strategy for navigating encounters with law enforcement. Understanding the stereotype that women should be silent and not answer back, a few women in the study were aware that violating such gender norms could result in being viewed as "difficult" by law enforcement. Overall, even though some asserted that they did not have a fear of officers, their concerns about police contact shaped their behavior.

Police have a job to protect and serve

Although many reported not being afraid of the police because officers were human, and respondents follow the law and know how to behave when confronted by the police, 14 percent (N=15) reported not being afraid because they believe that police are simply doing their job. While an equivalent number of men (N=7) and women (N=8) made this assertion, such sentiments were common among Baltimore residents (N=12) compared to Ferguson residents (N=3). Interestingly, this statement was particularly common among older Black participants in the study. In fact, of the 15 respondents who reported this as a common theme, all were over the age of 40 years except for three people. Older participants perceived that officer's primary job is to protect the innocent and serve community residents by providing aid when needed. For example, 50-year-old Willie, a resident of Ferguson, said "most of the police officers believe in that oath." Of police, Candice from Baltimore said, "I look at them as a protector not as they are going to do me harm." Though as a 60-year-old woman, Candice admitted, "I mean I'm not 18 years old so maybe 18-year-olds have a different perspective. In my age category they are not – what are they going to do?"

As older respondents, they perceived themselves in need of protection by the police and expected officers to assist them when needed. And 54-year-old Lorraine from Baltimore asserted that she was not afraid of the police because "when the police come, they probably trying to do their job anyway." Likewise, Morris, a 58-year-old Baltimore resident, stated that "if someone tries to break into my house I'm going to call the police, [and] I expect them to serve." Overall, older participants were much more likely to report that the mission of police is to protect and serve residents.

Hyper-aware of police

While most reported not being afraid of the police, a smaller number (N=7; 6 percent) noted being aware of police presence. A similar number

of men (N=4) and women (N=3) reported being hyper-aware of law enforcement. Such sentiments were common among Ferguson (N=4) and Baltimore (N=3) residents. Often when asked if they fear the police, participants responded no but were quick to qualify their feelings toward police. For instance, of police, Baltimore resident Breeann stated, she has “a healthy aware[ness]” of law enforcement. And Chaundrise from Baltimore admitted, “I am more aware. Before if something happened, I would call them. And now, I would still probably call them, I’m just more aware [of their presence].”

However, Black men from Ferguson were more likely to be on high alert of the police. Dwan stated that even though he is not afraid of the police, “I do be cautious about dealing with them.” And Maurice stated that his negative encounter with the police “made me more aware of, ‘okay, that’s how it is.’ It just made me more focused. More so on my toes about police officers.” Even though they reported being unafraid of police, a few remained conscious of police presence and cognizant of what they were capable of doing.

Discussion

Previous research on minorities and the police has consistently shown that Black civilians report more distrust in the police than any other racial/ethnic group (Gabbidon & Higgins, 2009). In addition, Black people disproportionately report being the recipient of aggressive police tactics and disproportionately experiencing a range of additional negative police actions (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). Most research on race and policing has primarily focused on Black males because they are routinely at the receiving end of aggressive crime control efforts (Anderson, 1999; Brunson, 2007; Rios, 2011). Although several studies have shown patterns of distrust among Black civilians, especially who reside in distressed urban communities, research on whether they fear the police is limited, and few consider how gender intersects with race and place in determining whether and why Black women fear the police. The current study extends previous research through a comparative qualitative analysis of the emotional reactions of Black men and women – a group who disproportionately are targeted, stopped, and surveilled – toward the police. The goal was to offer a contextual examination of whether and why they fear the police in their everyday lives. Moreover, by sampling men and women from Ferguson and Baltimore, this study provides insights into Black individuals’ perceptions of both race and place in shaping their emotional reaction toward the police.

Overall, the findings suggest that the sample of Black participants held a rather complex understanding of fear toward the police. Indeed, the vast

majority (73%) of men and women in the study reported that they did not fear the police. There did not appear to be qualitative differences between Black men and women who reported not being afraid of the police. However, most who reported not being fearful of the police resided in the city of Baltimore. In explaining their views about not being afraid of law enforcement, four key themes arose: police are human, respondents follow the law, they know how to behave if stopped by police, and they remain hyper-aware of law enforcement. Those who reported not fearing the police because they are human asserted that they were not afraid of anyone and refused to live in fear. Yet, despite a conscious decision not to fear the police this did not mean that Black people did not have a reason to fear. In fact, there were often contradictory statements in that even as some Black participants reported not being afraid of the police, there were admissions that they were afraid as to what the police might do and that the law would back them up even if they were in the wrong. Thus, findings illustrate that the fear is more subtle than overt but still present.

Some pointed to the fact that they obey the law, which precludes them from fearing the police. There was a belief among many that there was no reason to be afraid of state officials when one complies with the law. And even if stopped by police, some believed that their respectful mannerism and deferential demeanor would shield them from any potential problems. There was a common perception, particularly among Black men, that such reverential behavior needed to be displayed to neutralize any presumption of guilt or threat officers may associate with Black individuals. This is grounded in respectability politics, which is rooted in the belief that if only marginalized groups would behave better in public, present a better image to the outside world, and subscribe to mainstream values, then their lot in life would improve. This self-presentation strategy was historically adopted by enslaved Blacks where effort was made to fall in line with being good slaves in order to avoid punishments, such as physical and sexual assault, being separated or sold, and execution (Rodgers, 2017). In this contemporary day, “respectability focuses squarely on what one is not to do or say and with whom they are not to do it” (Kerrison, Cobbina, & Bender, 2018, p. 3). Because accepted norms for behavior are deeply racialized, gendered, and class-based, poor respectability performance can cast individuals as being criminally other (da Silva, 2013). In the current study, there was an awareness that any divergence from showing deference to officers could become a lethal event. In fact, even though reports were made of not fearing the police, some were certainly hyper-aware of the police, which stemmed from distrust. Aware of the broad powers to intervene and control their activities, even those who reported not being afraid

of the police described experiencing policing in a way that restricts and limits their use of public space. This is a modern kind of enslavement or restricted liberty not suffered by Whites, and illustrates that public space remains unwelcoming to Black bodies.

In contrast, older Black respondents, especially from Baltimore, were more likely to characterize the police as doing their jobs to protect and serve; hence, they were less likely to report being afraid of the police. Police action in distressed neighborhoods are distinct from those operating in middle-class and more affluent neighborhoods (Terrill & Reisig, 2003). Drugs and gang suppression efforts are often focused in urban neighborhoods. As a result of the visibility of such illegal activities, proactive aggressive police tactics are more acceptable to some neighborhood residents.

The study also found that Black people fear the police. While not as prevalent as those who reported not being afraid of the police, one-quarter noted that they were indeed afraid of law enforcement. Such comments were more common among women and those residing in Ferguson. Several in the study said that aggressive policing strategies left them feeling intimidated. Respondents believed that the police served as an occupying force in their communities because they assumed those residing in these neighborhoods were “criminals.” Black civilians reported often being viewed with suspicion by police. Recall Dyshelle who was accused of smoking marijuana in her vehicle by an officer who she was driving by even though there was no evidence of this. And remember Justin’s account explaining that a police officer threatened to shoot him and his friend if they did not get on the ground after being accused of drinking in public, which they refuted. They tied this most explicitly to race but also to geographical location, as those residing in economically distressed neighborhoods were more likely to come under police surveillance and control. Moreover, fear of the police stemmed from prior negative interactions, especially among Black woman in the study. Consistent with prior studies, Black women reported being the recipient of police misconduct, mistreatment, and violence (Ritchie, 2017). Involuntary police contact coupled with mistreatment during such contacts initiated an accrued body of lived experiences that shaped Black civilian’s distrust toward and fear of the police. Even when Black women in the study called the police for help because they needed protection and service, some found themselves arrested. Consequently, police were viewed by some study participants as the face of larger systems of inequality because they interact in Black communities daily.

The current study provides evidence that Black residents of urban cities have justifiable negative feelings toward police and police practices. This includes both overt and subtle fear of police. These feelings make it difficult to expect that community members and law enforcement officers will be

able to work together to solve crimes or prevent violence. As a result, there have been many activists demanding fewer interactions with the police. Rather than having police respond to situations, such as traffic violations, some are calling for the implementation of alternative first responder teams to handle such situations. There have been many calls to defund the police in which funding is reallocated away from police departments to human centered services in marginalized communities, such as education, employment, housing, and healthcare. Defunding the police offers a solution to addressing the root causes of crime by ameliorating the conditions that give rise to high levels of crime and making investments that increase economic mobility. Many cities have made moves to defund the police. For example, the School District of Minneapolis, Minnesota terminated its contract with the Minneapolis Police Department and will use these funds for mentoring its students (Beckett, 2020). The city of Los Angeles has made steps to cut \$100 million dollars to its police force and use those dollars to invest in marginalized communities (Cowan, 2020). The New York City Council announced that it would cut the NYPD budget by \$1 billion and many cities are following suit (Associated Press, 2020). As cities restructure public spending priorities, evaluation studies must be conducted to examine the effects of defunding police on crime rates and community resident's ability to secure affordable housing, quality jobs, and health services.

Moreover, there are some innovative approaches that communities have been exploring to promote safety and wellbeing outside of policing. Advance Peace is a nonprofit organization committed to ending cyclical gun violence by investing in the development, health, and wellbeing of individuals who are most likely to be perpetrators of gun violence (Corburn, Boggan, & Muttaqi, 2020). Recognizing that unhealed trauma often contribute to firearm use, the organization understands that people who engage in and are harmed by urban gun violence are young individuals of color living in communities with long histories of structural racism, divestment, and isolation from law enforcement, social services, and education (Corburn et al., 2020). Rather than rely on law enforcement to communicate messages against gun violence, Advance Peace relies on street outreach workers and formerly incarcerated individuals to use their skills to build meaningful relationships while also working with community-based organizations. Outcome evaluations of Advance Peace show positive results. For instance, both Stockton and Sacramento, California have experienced a 21 percent reduction in gun homicides and assaults in 2018 and 2019 (Corburn & Fukutome, 2021; Corburn & Fukutome-Lopez, 2020).

The prevention and reduction of over-policing of Black bodies requires thwarting racial bias at the heart of punitive policing practices. Shifting the culture of policing such that defunding the police and utilizing street

outreach workers to curb gun violence are alternative approaches to ensure public safety and reduce fear of state-sanctioned and civilian violence.

Notes

1. The interview team consisted of four people. Three of the four individuals were Black, and one was White. They included two Black female university professors, a White female professor, and a Black male PhD student. The entire research team was in their 30s.
2. Of the nine participants who reported police mistreatment as a theme, all were Ferguson residents with the exception of one from Baltimore. Justin, who was from Baltimore, had a negative police encounter, which drove him to fear that he and/or others would become the recipient of mistreatment from law enforcement.
3. This includes those who protested in Baltimore and Ferguson but may not have resided within these cities.

Notes on contributor

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