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Perceptions of race, crime, and policing among Ferguson protesters

Jennifer E. Cobbinaa, Akwasi Owusu-Bempahb and Kimberly Bendera,*

aSchool of Criminal Justice, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, USA; bDepartment of Criminal Justice, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

ABSTRACT
Research demonstrates that race is commonly associated with perceptions of crime and thus, crime committed by people of color is often overestimated by the public, particularly white Americans. Studies also find that race is a predictor of citizens’ attitudes towards and experiences with the police. However, studies have not yet explored if and how minorities associate crime with people of color. Drawing from interviews with 81 men and women, this study explores the extent to which protesters from Ferguson, Missouri racially typify crime and their perceptions of how the police view and treat people who are black compared to people who are white. Results revealed that most respondents did not associate people of color with crime but believed that the police did. Additionally, the negative perceptions participants believed police to have were connected with broader social inequalities. Findings from this study reinforce the importance of police legitimacy.

KEYWORDS
Race; crime; police; Ferguson protesters

On 9 August 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed young black male, was shot dead by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. Brown had been walking with a friend down the center of Canfield Drive when Wilson, passing in his patrol vehicle, told them to move to the sidewalk. They refused. Conflicting accounts, however, remain as to what led to Brown’s death. Brown’s friend asserted that Wilson started a scuffle in the vehicle by grabbing Brown by the neck, and that Brown tried to pull away as Wilson drew his gun and shot Brown in the hand. At that time, Brown’s friend stated that Brown ran, was shot in the back, and then turned around and raised his hands to surrender but the officer opened fire. Wilson and Ferguson police disputed these claims alleging that after Wilson told the teens to move to the sidewalk, he realized Brown was a robbery suspect. Wilson testified that as he tried to exit his vehicle, Brown pushed him back into the car, punched him, reached for his gun, and a struggle for the gun followed during which Wilson fired two shots. At some point, Brown ran, and Wilson chased him and shot the young man after he turned and charged toward him. Reports show that Wilson fired 12 bullets, six of which hit Brown, including two in the head. The Missouri Prosecutor Robert McCullough decided to bring the case in front of a grand jury to determine whether there was probable cause to indict Wilson for his actions. On 24 November 2014, McCullough announced that the grand jury had decided not to indict Wilson. The killing of Brown and the grand jury announcement sparked civil unrest across the nation, inciting conversations about policing and race.
Race is one of the most common demographic characteristics found to be associated with citizens' perceptions of crime and criminality. Research has consistently demonstrated that white Americans strongly associate racial minorities with crime (Chiricos, McEntire, and Gertz 2001; Quillian and Pager 2001; Soler 2001) and overestimate the proportion of crime committed by people of color (Chiricos, Welch, and Gertz 2004; Pickett et al. 2012; Unnever and Cullen 2012). In addition, race is consistently found to be a strong predictor of citizens' attitudes towards and experiences with the police. Black individuals are more likely than whites to report negative personal experiences and dissatisfaction with law enforcement (Taylor et al. 2001).

However, important gaps remain in our understanding of racial perceptions of crime, policing, and public opinion. First, most studies examining racial perceptions of crime focus on the views of white people or on racially or ethnically mixed groups of respondents (Ghandnoosh 2014). To date, however, scholars have devoted less attention to exploring whether and to what extent African-Americans also associate race with crime and crime with race. We do know that African-Americans are far more likely than whites to live in economically distressed neighborhoods, and available evidence demonstrates that blacks are over-represented in national arrest statistics (Sampson and Lauritsen 1997; Brown et al. 2003). Thus, African-Americans may themselves racialize crime based on their own lived experiences. Conversely, African-Americans may believe that the over-representation of racial minorities in the criminal justice system is a result of other factors, such as racial profiling by police. Second, research on racial perceptions of crime relies almost exclusively on survey research and implicit bias tests to determine whether individuals racially typify crime – the extent to which people associate crime with blacks. This work has been useful in identifying who is more likely to associate people of color with crime, but it does not allow for an examination of why some individuals racially typify crime and others do not.

Such examinations are particularly warranted in economically distressed, high-crime neighborhoods, where residents face increased unwelcome police attention and the police–citizen relationship is tenuous (Klinger 1997; Kane 2002; Terrill and Reisig 2003). Thus, we provide a contextual examination of Ferguson protesters' views about the racialization of crime and the criminalization of race. The present study is exploratory and we draw upon in-depth interviews with 81 protestors in Ferguson, Missouri to investigate whether and why racial minorities and whites racially typify crime. We also examine protesters' perceptions of whether police officers associate African-Americans and whites with criminal offending.

Two bodies of literature are relevant to our research. First, the scholarly literature has established the presumed link of crime with black individuals (Hawkins 1995; Russell 1998). Second, research on citizens' attitudes towards the police demonstrates that blacks hold negative perceptions towards the police. Thus, these bodies of literature are briefly reviewed next.

**Literature review**

**Racialized perceptions of crime**

It is well established that Americans, particularly whites, strongly associate criminal activity with race and race with criminal activity. That is, blacks are generally characterized as aggressive, hostile, criminal, and violent by members of the public (Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Hurwitz and Peffley 1997; Peffley and Hurwitz 1998). For example, in Devine and Elliot's (1995) follow-up study on Princeton students, 147 white students were provided a checklist comprised of 93 adjectives and asked to mark those that represent stereotypes about blacks. They found that ‘hostile’ and ‘criminal’ were in the top 10 adjectives frequently identified to describe African-Americans. Moreover, in their examination of public attitudes toward youth, race, and crime, Soler (2001) found that over 34% of respondents agreed that black juveniles are more likely to commit crime than white juveniles, and 35% agreed that black youth are more prone to violence than young people of other races.

Research also shows that the public overestimates the proportion of crimes committed by people of color. Using national survey data, Chiricos et al. (2004) discovered that a racially diverse group of...
respondents exaggerated black involvement in violent crime and burglary. Specifically, respondents estimated that 40% of people who commit violent offenses and 38% of people who are involved in burglary are black; however, crime victimization surveys showed these rates to be 29 and 32%, respectively. Based on the results of a nationally representative survey, Pickett et al. (2012) also discovered that white Americans overestimated black participation in burglaries, illegal sale of drugs, and juvenile crime by 20 to 30%. Overall, studies suggest that whites and respondents from other racial and ethnic backgrounds racially typify crime.

Some scholars assert the criminalization of black people is facilitated in large part by racially biased media representations of crime. Media messages are potent tools in the construction of otherness and an 'us vs. them' discourse, common in crime stories, where ‘us’ – the good guys – need to be wary of ‘them’ – the predatory criminal, who is often portrayed as animalistic, vengeful, violent, and a member of a racial/ethnic minority group (Barak 1994). In her examination of local news programming in Chicago, Entman (1992) found that 84% of crime stories about African-American suspects involved violent crime compared to 71% of white offenders. Furthermore, 38% of black suspects were featured while being physically held or restrained by officers compared with 18% of white suspects being featured in similar circumstances. Because the public relies on the mass media as their primary source of information about crime, the high volume of crime news that involves members of specific racial and ethnic groups is enough to convince the average person that the face of crime is colored (Rome 2002). Indeed, the stereotypical image of blacks as a criminal threat has led to perceptions of the ‘criminalblackman’ (Russell 1998), which play into the public’s fear of crime.

Spurred by mass media, criminalized depictions of black males have produced a host of damaging consequences, including the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about blacks. However, these images and ideologies of black criminality are not new. During the earliest periods of American development, European colonists transported Africans to the New World as chattel slaves, a degradation that lasted well into the twentieth century (Bell 1992, 2). In order to justify their enslavement, black people had to be viewed as inferior beings, and were often portrayed as animalistic and violent ‘savages’ who were inherently criminal (Fishman 2006; Unnever and Gabbidon 2011). The legacy has persisted with images of ‘menacing’ blacks, most recently revived in the 1970s and 1980s in the context of the ‘WAR ON DRUGS,’ which some have come to see as a ‘War on blacks’ (Nunn 2002). That is, blacks have borne the brunt of the drug war, as they are disproportionately arrested, prosecuted, convicted, and imprisoned for drug offenses (Tonry 1995; Alexander 2010). Ultimately, it is argued that the structural inequalities facing many blacks is rooted in the nation’s history, and is a product of, and integral to, their ongoing racialization (Wacquant 2002; Omi and Winant 2015).

The historical criminalization of blacks coupled with excessive news coverage portraying African-Americans as criminal is integral to the formation of implicit bias (Staats and Patton 2013). Implicit bias refers to the attitudes and stereotypes that impact our understanding, actions, and decision-making processes in an unconscious manner (Staats and Patton 2013). Research with police officers has examined implicit bias in law enforcement settings. Correll et al. (2007) used video game simulation in which armed black and white men appeared, and instructed officers from the Denver Police Department (who were predominately white) to shoot armed targets as quickly as possible. They found that officers shot armed black suspects more quickly than armed white suspects, but that they were less likely to mistakenly shoot at unarmed black suspects than members of the general public. Likewise, another study of police officers from across the USA found that not only were officers quicker to shoot black suspects than white suspects but also that the officer's accuracy was higher in scenarios involving African-Americans than for scenarios involving whites (Sadler et al. 2012). Automatic implicit bias has also been found to negatively influence officers’ interpretations of blacks' behavior (as suspicious or aggressive), and the perception of blacks as more blameworthy, thus meriting harsher sanctions (Graham and Lowery 2004; Richardson 2011). Available evidence suggests that the general public is aware of such bias on the part of law enforcement.
Race, policing, and public opinion

Following the social unrest of the 1960s, considerable effort has been spent investigating citizens’ attitudes towards the police (Brown and Benedict 2002). One of the most consistent findings emerging from this line of research is that black people hold more negative perceptions of the police than do members of other racial groups (Jefferson and Walker 1993; Wortley 1996; Weitzer 1999; Weitzer and Tuch 2006; Brunson 2007). Indeed, most studies find that black citizens hold more negative attitudes towards the police than do white citizens (Zeitz 1964; Bayley and Mendelsohn 1969; Decker 1981; Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Leiber, Nalla, and Farnworth 1998; Gabbidon and Higgins 2009) and studies that have included other racial/ethnic groups typically find that Hispanics and Asians occupy a middle ground between blacks and whites (Weitzer and Tuch 2006; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2009). The consistent finding that black people hold the most negative attitudes towards the police can be best understood by reference to their personal and vicarious experiences with law enforcement officials (Brunson 2007; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011). As Weitzer and Tuch (2006) point out, personal contact with the police has a strong influence over the development of attitudes towards the institution. This is particularly true when contact is initiated by the police rather than the citizen (Wortley, Hagan, and Macmillan 1997). Given that blacks are proportionately more likely to experience police initiated contact, the potential for them to develop negative attitudes towards the police is increased (Harris 1999). Indeed, recent studies documenting citizens interpretations of recent police encounters find that blacks are more likely than members of other racial groups to report that they were treated in an unfair and disrespectful manner by the police (Gabbidon, Higgins, and Potter 2011; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011). Likewise, because police practices vary by geographical location, the over-representation of blacks 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; Fagan and Davies 2000; Brunson and Miller 2006).

Evidently, perceptions of police bias are widespread among black citizens; yet, we know very little about how the police view black people (Vera Sanchez and Rosenbaum 2011). However, in his early ethnographic research with the police, Skolnick (1966) found that officers viewed young black men as ‘Symbolic Assailants.’ That is, African-Americans are perceived ‘as persons who use gesture, language, and attire that the policeman has come to recognize as a prelude to violence’ (p. 45). Contemporary research has highlighted the stereotypical ways in which the police view black people. Drawing upon data collected with 50 black police officers, Bolton and Feagin (2004) suggest that police officers come to view blacks in monolithic terms – as the drug dealers and criminals that they experience on the street (p. 72). Research suggests that these stereotypes tend to denigrate black citizens leading to a view among police officers that blacks are uncivilized and inferior (Bolton and Feagin 2004; Owusu-Bempah 2014). These stereotypes also influence the manner in which police officers interact with black citizens. For example, both Bolton and Feagin (2004) and Owusu-Bempah (2014) found that the stereotypical assumptions police officers hold about blacks, especially those linking blackness with crime, justify and validate disrespectful treatment directed at black people by the police.

Available evidence suggests that police officers’ views of minority citizens are also shaped by neighborhood context and racial composition. Research examining officers’ views of race and policing across neighborhoods has shown that the police view Latino neighborhoods differently than African-American neighborhoods, although both may face problems of crime. For example, Sanchez and Rosenbaum (2011) found that officers in their study thought that Latinos cared about their neighborhoods while black neighborhoods were viewed as ‘depressing,’ ‘warzones’ comprised of individuals ‘without hope’ (p. 166). Additionally, the officers felt misunderstood and unwelcome in minority neighborhoods, contending that their views of community members are largely shaped by residents’ attitudes towards them (Vera Sanchez and Rosenbaum 2011). The extant literature suggests that officers’ views of citizens, much like citizens’ views of the police, are developed through personal and vicarious experience (Alex, 1969; Bolton and Feagin 2004; Owusu-Bempah 2014). As such, officers who patrol disadvantaged black neighborhoods and encounter (perhaps justifiably) hostile black citizens come to see these features as
characteristic of all black people/communities. Thus, citizens’ views of the police, much like police views of citizens, may be characterized by ‘mirrored hostilities’ or a ‘mutual disdain’ (Owusu-Bempah 2014).

What is absent from research on racial perceptions of crime, policing and public opinion is consideration of whether and to what extent minorities racially typify crime. In particular, we know little about whether and to what extent African-Americans racialize crime. In addition, it is unclear if black individuals associate crime as a black phenomenon for the same reasons that they believe police racialize crime. Below we examine the extent to which Ferguson protesters racially typify crime and the extent to which they believe the police do as well.

**Methods**

**Data**

The present study draws on qualitative in-depth interviews with black and white adults who self-identified as being engaged in some form of community action in Ferguson, Missouri following the death of Michael Brown. The interviews were conducted between October 2014 and November 2014 in a variety of locations across the Greater St. Louis metropolitan area, including in a conference room at a local university, in fast food restaurants, coffee shops, and a local public library. Prior to the commencing interview, the research team outlined the study objectives and assured respondents that they would be guaranteed confidentiality. Participation in the study was voluntary and respondents were paid $40 for their involvement.

The sample selection was purposive in nature. Individuals were recruited to participate in the project if they engaged in some form of community action (e.g. protests, marches, rallies, meetings, etc.) following the death of Michael Brown. Respondents were actively recruited to participate in the study using several methods. First, a flyer about the research project was placed on the first author’s Facebook and Twitter account, which was shared broadly to others on social media. Second, the editor of a minority newspaper in St. Louis broadcasted the study information several times on Twitter to his 7,000 plus followers. Third, an ad was placed in the employment section of a minority newspaper in the city of St. Louis recruiting participants to the study. Finally, fliers were handed out to students at a local community college and posted at a university in St. Louis. Approximately two-thirds of respondents were recruited into the study using social media and the remaining one-third were recruited via advertisement.

Data collection began with a digitally recorded in-depth, semi-structured interview, which lasted on average one hour. The present study is exploratory and we draw upon in-depth interviews with 81 respondents to investigate whether and why racial minorities and whites racially typify crime. Specifically, to examine the connection of race to crime, respondents were asked to explain the reasons they thought that African-Americans commit more or less crimes than whites. Also, since it remains unclear if African-Americans associate crime as a black phenomenon for the same reasons that they believe police racialize crime, we examined respondents’ views of why police officers associate African-Americans and white people with criminal offending.

**Analytical strategy**

Audio recordings of the interview were transcribed, formatted, and read into Nvivo, a qualitative research software. To begin the analysis, the first author sorted all relevant data into three separate data-sets, which include: (1) respondents’ views of police perceptions of blacks, (2) respondents’ views of police perceptions of whites, and (3) respondents’ perceptions of blacks and crime. We then used inductive analysis techniques to identify perceptions of race and crime, reasons for such perceptions, and their effects/consequences. For each data-set, all three authors independently coded 10 cases for themes concerning perceptions, and then met to discuss, compare, and refine the codes. Each author identified strong patterns tied to respondent’s accounts regarding perceptions of race and crime, and a codebook was generated for this study. Once the categories were agreed upon, we then independently coded
an additional 10 cases. In cases where there were discrepancies in coding, all three authors worked
together to refine our analysis of the thematic patterns reported here. Once the discrepancies were
resolved, the remaining transcripts were coded independently by the first and third author. This analytic
approach established inter-rater reliability, and resulted in a more systematic and rigorous examination.

We used several inductive analytic techniques to strengthen the internal validity of our analysis. We began with multiple readings of the data, during which we coded passages and noted preliminary
analytic observations. A constant comparative approach was also used, which entailed systematic com-
parisons to search for similar and distinct patterns between black and white protesters. This allowed for
the refinement or rejection of initially identified analytic patterns. Finally, we used basic tabulations to
identify the strength of the patterns we uncovered (see Silverman 2006, 296–301). The current study
depicts concepts and illustrations that reflect the most common patterns of protesters’ accounts.

Study setting
Ferguson, a city with a population of slightly more than 21,000 is in St. Louis County and part of the
Greater St. Louis metropolitan area. Despite being a suburban community, the structural conditions
found in the city of Ferguson resemble that of many inner cities. Table 1 provides a comparison of
demographic and socioeconomic indicators for residents in Ferguson and St. Louis County overall. The
table demonstrates distinct differences between the characteristics of residents who live in the city of
Ferguson compared with those who live in the County. For example, the proportion of African-Americans
is nearly three times higher in the city of Ferguson than St. Louis County as a whole. Furthermore,
Ferguson residents are characterized by higher rates of unemployment and poverty than residents of
the County; indeed, Ferguson residents have a median income $20,000 lower than those in the County.
The proportion of female-headed households is also two times greater in the city of Ferguson. In sum,
people who live in the city of Ferguson fare worse on a number of socioeconomic indicators when
compared with individuals who reside in St. Louis County.

Results
Sample characteristics
Table 2 provides a basic description of the sample. As shown, there are 81 protesters (42 males and 39
females) included in the study. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 65 with a mean age of 35 years. The
sample includes 75 African-Americans and 6 white protesters. As it relates to educational status, the modal
category is some college education, with respondents reporting that they were either currently in college
or had attended/taken some college courses. In terms of economic standing, 50 respondents reported
that they were currently working part- or full-time at the time of the interview and the remainder were
unemployed. Finally, 50 of the protesters included in the sample lived in the city of Ferguson and for an
average of nine years, while the rest resided in the broader St. Louis area and for an average of 16 years.

Ferguson protesters’ racial perceptions of crime
We asked respondents a series of questions to examine their racialized perceptions of crime. First,
we asked respondents whether they felt that African-Americans are more or less likely to engage in
criminal activity than white people. Fully 56% (N = 45) of respondents felt that crime was committed equally by members of both groups. Nevertheless, 17% (N = 14) of respondents reported that they felt African-Americans are more likely to commit crime than whites and 22% (N = 18) said they believe white people are more likely to engage in crime than African-Americans. Our goal is to examine whether and why racial minorities and whites racially typify crime. We begin by examining the accounts of black and white protesters in Ferguson who believed that crime cuts across race/ethnicity. This is followed by an examination of responses from study participants who believed blacks engage in more criminal activity than whites, followed by those who believed blacks commit fewer crimes than whites. It should be noted that several common themes emerged here – namely: the importance of the nature or type of offense; the role of socioeconomic status; and media representation of crime. Below we explain how each of these themes is related to the protesters’ racialized perceptions of crime. In doing so, we emphasize how conceptualizations of race shaped perceptions of criminal involvement.

### Black and whites are equally involved in criminal activity

As noted above, the majority of respondents believed that African-Americans and white people are equally likely to engage in crime. Nevertheless, there were differences in these respondents’ explanations for holding such beliefs. For example, some of the respondents felt that the types of crime committed by each racial group were different.

#### Nature of offense

Of those respondents who felt that crime is equally distributed across the racial groups considered, 36% (N = 16) reported that blacks and whites engaged in different types of non-violent and violent offenses. According to these respondents, Africans-Americans were more likely to commit petty crimes than were white people. For example, Diamond, a black woman, said, blacks typically engage in ‘petty crimes. it’s marijuana. it’s petty theft.’ Mike, an African-American male, lamented, that there ‘ain’t no jobs out here, can’t nobody get a job.’ As a result, he affirmed that people are ‘out here selling drugs … trying
to make a living.' When blacks did engage in violent activity, it was believed to be drug-related. When asked what kind of crimes African-Americans commit, Terrell, a black male, responded, ‘selling drugs and guns, gun charges and murders … all the murders are over heroin.’

By contrast, nearly one-third (N = 5) of respondents who underscored the nature of offense reported that whites generally engaged in white-collar offenses. Terrell perceived that ‘white people do insurance fraud, white-collar crimes, all of that, every day. Literally, every day they do that, make false insurance claims and launder money, all of that good stuff but that gets swept right under the rug.’ Brittany, a black woman, believed that ‘[t]he embezzling of the corporations … I feel like those are whites who commit those kinds of crimes.’ Though respondents considered whites to be more likely to commit white-collar offenses, such as embezzlement, fraud, and money laundering, it was believed that they eluded detection and severe sanctioning. This is despite the high economic costs of committing such crimes.

In addition to white-collar crime, several respondents (N = 4) also maintained that whites were more likely than blacks to engage in heinous crimes, such as killing family members or engaging in mass murder. Of whites, Ashley, a black female, stated, ‘[w]e have a lot of them that murder – parents that murder the siblings, we have a lot of them that shoot up the classrooms, school shootings, mall shooting.’ Likewise, Donte, an African-American man, said, whites are more likely to ‘drown their baby … kill they families … or go to a school and shoot the whole school.’ While Jasmine, a black woman, believed that whites engage in white-collar crimes, she also noted they are more likely to be ‘serial killers and rapists.’

While slightly over half (56%) of the entire sample felt that black and white people are equally likely to engage in crime, just over one-third (N = 16) of these respondents who believed crime was equally distributed across racial groups held that African-Americans received harsher penalties than whites for their involvement in illicit activity. In particular, Ferguson protesters commonly reported that blacks were more likely to be profiled, arrested, charged, and sentenced more severely than their white counterparts. Dylan, a white male, stated, ‘I just think that African Americans are often targeted more directly than whites.’ Similarly, Tray, a black man, said, ‘all criminals do their share of their crime, whether they’re white or black … but I believe we [blacks] are profiled as the most dominant to do the crime.’ And Donte, a black male, recounts a court case he observed:

I have been locked up, and during the time that I was in trial and court I see the white man comes to court with a dope case … a first time dope case. He got five months’ probation. And the black man, sorry, a black woman coming in, first time dope case, [she] got ten years. What was the difference? He sold dope. She sold dope. His first time in trouble, her first time in trouble. He’s white, he’s put on paper. He goes home. She gotten years for dope. What was the difference? For the same dope case.

Overall, some respondents believed that while blacks get arrested and charged for committing these crimes, whites benefit from discrimination in the administration of justice because they are less likely to be apprehended and/or formally processed.

**Socioeconomic status**

In addition, one-fifth (N = 9) of the respondents who felt that crime was equally distributed across racial groups reported that economic marginality, rather than racial background, is closely linked to criminal offending. That is, high levels of unemployment and poverty lead to high levels of crime. When questioned whether minorities are more or less likely to engage in crime, Reginald, an African-American male, reported, ‘I don’t think it’s a race issue. I think it’s a socio-economic issue.’ Likewise, Breeann, a black woman, stated, ‘I don’t think one race of people … is predisposed to being a criminal. There could be circumstances. I’m hungry, I’m going to steal this bread and this bologna out of the store. You know, because they’re hungry.’

A few respondents noted just how difficult it was for individuals with felony records to secure employment. In her discussions of African-Americans, Jada, a black female, said that ‘a lot of us don’t have jobs because we have felonies. We have records, you know, and they look at us and they look at the records and they’re like, no, and that’ what a lot of my brothers, that’s what they’re saying.’ Andre, a black male, concurred, stating, ‘I work with clients that have criminal background histories, felonies
on their records … trying to move past that ‘F’ that’s been branded on their head, that felony, is a challenge … [because] many companies won’t – hire felons. Thus, not only have the social barriers made decent jobs and higher education virtually non-existent for most poor individuals but those with a felony record face incredible difficulty securing employment opportunities that are available.

**Media portrayals of crime**

While acknowledging that rates of criminal activity are similar across racial groups, a small number of respondents (N = 7), all of whom were African-American, felt that the media is responsible for perpetuating negative stereotypes about blacks by focusing undue attention on their crimes. For instance, in speaking about crimes committed by blacks, Breeann stated, ‘I think our [crime] is more publicized.’ And Crystal adamantly stated, ‘I think a lot of things that us African-Americans do are put on the spot more than what white Americans do. They don’t broadcast it as much but they do just as much crime.’ Some respondents believed that an intentional plan was made to focus on black criminality. Violet said, ‘I think everyone commits a crime, we’re [blacks are] just more broadcasted more than the Caucasian people, to make it look like we’re committing more crimes.’ Deshawn explained firsthand how he witnessed a lack of news coverage when whites systematically engaged in criminal activity:

I went to school in the country. When I say country, it was nothing in this town but hicks and my university …. I went to college in a town where they had tractor trailer day where they drove a tractor to their high school. Whoever had the most expensive tractor was the popular student. Okay, So, trailer parks everywhere. People was dying. Whites was killing whites every single day. Every single day. Meth deals. Shady deals with land. It was like some type of crime going on. It was a white person involved [in] another white person every single day …. It was never on the news. No. But it wasn’t on the news for a few reasons. One, it was bad publicity for the university. You know what I’m saying. They would lose money because they would lose people coming to that university because they look at it like bad college town. Number two, it was white Americans.

A few protesters in the sample with this view believed that the association of blackness with criminality was driven and reinforced, in part, by media portrayals of crime. Consistent with prior research, it was perceived that the mass media frequently reported on crimes that involve African-Americans as threatening and violent criminals (see Entman 1992; Dixon and Linz 2000).

**Blacks are more likely than whites to be involved in criminal activity**

Although the majority of protesters in the sample felt that crime is equally distributed across the racial groups considered here, 19% reported that African-Americans commit more crime than whites. All of these respondents were black with the exception of one. Three common themes used by respondents to explain their belief that blacks engage in more crime were socioeconomic status, inherent black criminality, and media portrayals of crime.5

**Socioeconomic status**

In particular, seven of these respondents believed blacks commit more crimes than whites because minorities are more likely to live in disadvantaged neighborhoods, increasing their participation in crime out of economic necessity. Willie, an African-American male, asserted that blacks are often faced with ‘not having jobs, not having opportunities.’ And Cliff, a black man, stated, African-Americans are more likely to commit crime than whites ‘if they’re in a predicament where they have to survive.’ It was believed that growing levels of poverty and increasing economic precarity increases criminal offending among blacks.

**Black criminality**

Of those who reported that blacks engaged in illicit activity more than whites, three protesters in the sample believed that African-American’s were more prone to offending behavior. All were black. Specifically, there was a belief among some that blacks were inherently criminal. Javonte claimed ‘African
Americans are already prone. Anything that upsets them whether it be the police upsetting them, whether it be another group – gang upsetting another gang, crime is going to be at a highest point because we’re already prone.' Tyrone, asserted that young black individuals are more likely to have ‘parents that’s on dope, and things of that nature.’ Nina explained:

I think we do commit more crime … We commit crime against each other. If you notice we have the highest death rate and we kill each other off of colors, streets, all that type of stuff. That is another reason why people don’t see value in this [protesting for Michael Brown] because you all kill each other.

Though not a common theme, a small number believed that black people are inherently more crime prone than white people.

**Media portrayals of crime**

In addition, two respondents reported that blacks engage in more crime than whites because of what they see depicted in mass media. Of those who had such viewpoints, one was white. Dylan, a white male admitted that because of the ‘sensationalization by the media’ more blacks fit the stereotype of ‘African Americans being criminals.’ And Derrell, a black man, claimed ‘in the news you see more black people doing bad stuff than white people. I barely see white people on the news.’ As media crime coverage tends to focus on black offender, Derrell and Dylan believed that crime is primarily perpetuated by African-Americans. Thus, rather than suggesting that the media overemphasizes the crimes of blacks, like some others did, these two felt that media depictions of crime are reflective of actual levels of black offending.

**White people are more likely to engage in crime than African-Americans**

As mentioned above, 22% of the respondents, all of whom were African-Americans with the exception of one, believed that blacks engage in less crime than whites. Two common reasons included the nature of offense and media portrayals of crime.6

**Nature of offense**

Among respondents who believed that white people engaged in less crime than African-Americans, five highlighted the nature of offenses committed across race and three emphasized the deadly nature of white crime. Of white suspects, Rebecca, a black woman, said ‘their crime is much worse than what our [black] crime is.’ And Caitlyn, an African-American female, said that even though blacks and whites both commit crimes, when death is the outcome, ‘white people chop up bodies and black people shoot people.’ Though a few believed whites committed more heinous crimes, Monique, a black female, felt that white criminals ‘got enough money to keep their [criminal involvement] hid.’ In this sense, some of our respondents felt that white people commit more damaging or heinous crimes than black people.

**Media portrayals of crime**

In explaining their views, four respondents reported that they believed the mass media tends to exaggerate black crime and that African-Americans engage in less crime than whites. Javon, a black male, said ‘I think that white people do more crime than black people.’ He continued: ‘I mean, they say black-on-black crime, but what they say when that [white] boy went in that movie theater and then shot all them people? That’s a big crime if you ask me.’ When asked if blacks commit more crimes than whites, Xavier, an African-American male, responded:

… Contrary to popular belief, no … [It’s] more Caucasians than blacks. It’s just that the media I mean they’re about selling and making money and everything. They’ll up play crime about anybody. You know, but they seem to have a special interest in especially up playing men in this country. Particularly in them areas where the demographics of the powers that be they don’t match. They don’t reflect, collectively speaking, the black community at large.
Interestingly, some respondents recognized that crime reporting was racially biased and they refused to give into misconceptions about crime. Nevertheless, this was common only among a handful of respondents. Others commented on the duration of time the media focus on crimes committed by blacks and whites. When asked whether blacks are more or less likely to commit crimes than whites, Isabelle responded:

I would say black people are less likely, they’re just more advertised, or the media actually goes after the blacks that do crime. You don’t hear too many – too much about the white crimes, if you do hear about it, you hear about it and then it’s gone, snatched away very quick.

In accounting for whites’ increased participation in crime, respondents evoked similar reasoning to that provided in response to their perceptions about how the police view whites and crime – through the lens of white privilege. Specifically, respondents who believed white people are more criminal than blacks suggested that whites cause more damage, either because they are involved in more heinous crimes that result in serious physical harm or death, or because they engage in corporate crimes that victimize large numbers of people. Likewise, these respondents pointed out that the media downplays crime committed by whites.

Ferguson protesters’ perceptions of how police view black people in relation to crime

Here, we examine how respondents understand police officers’ perceptions of race and crime. Ferguson protesters’ accounts of police officers’ views of black offending were often constructed in ways that sharply contrasted from white offending. To examine the racial-specific meanings respondents bring to their interpretation of whether or not law enforcement racially typify crime, we first examine how they thought the police view blacks and crime, then how they thought police view whites and crime. Specifically, when respondents were asked how police perceive blacks as it relates to offending, on the one hand, they emphasized they were considered guilty and worthless. On the other hand, respondents perceived that officers viewed whites as innocent, more superior, and less threatening than black people.

Blacks are perceived as guilty by the police

Fully, 56% (N = 45) of respondents reported that African-Americans were considered as culpable villains by law enforcement. Yolanda, a black woman, remarked, ‘I think they view the majority of us as being ignorant, uneducated, criminals.’ Likewise, Kaleem, a black male, lamented, ‘[t]hey think African American males are suspect’s first, civilians second.’ Common sentiments among respondents were that blacks were typically considered dangerous, intimidating, and violent by law enforcement. Andre, a black man, surmised that blacks are labeled as ‘aggressive, criminal, animalistic, you know, disrespectful. I think that those issues are very real and prevalent in the mind of a lot of officers.’

Sixteen of the respondents who said that they believed the police view African-Americans as guilty, argued that the negative association of blacks with crime was rooted in historical patterns that are connected with slavery. When asked why she thought officers viewed African-Americans as guilty, Brittany, an African-American woman, said, ‘it goes way, way back into the times of slavery.’ From this point of view, Yolanda, a black female, believed that racist attitudes and distortions of African-Americans were learned at home in which whites are taught ‘these black people are this, or these black people are that.’ Consequently, some viewed the outcome of such perceptions is fear. That is, seven protesters believed that law enforcement were generally fearful of blacks. For example, Maurice, a black male, said that officers have ‘some type of fear with blacks.’ Likewise, Brittney, an African-American woman, stated that ‘[p]olice officers and white people in general … [have] fear, and then they act on that fear.’

Some respondents (N = 7; 16%) who reported police view blacks as guilty believed that suspicion and fear on the part of law enforcement was reflective of the reality of black participation in crime. Tray, a black male, stated, ‘you got a lot of black people doing a lot of illegal things.’ And Diamond, a black woman, acknowledged that ‘crime is high in the African American community.’ However, among those
who mentioned black criminality, a few recognized the structural conditions that characterize many disadvantaged neighborhoods, which are conducive to criminal involvement. Dyshelle, an African-American woman, said, ‘if you don’t have jobs … or [good] schools … you will commit crimes to try to provide for your family.’ And Alexus, a black female, explained:

It’s already proven that when you have extreme poverty and things like that then there is a higher crime rate because everybody’s – you know what I’m saying – fighting to try to survive, just the basic living necessities. So it’s the conditions that they’re subject to living in.

A lack of institutional resources led some to believe that many blacks engaged in criminal activity in an effort to make ends meet.

One-fifth (N = 9) of those who felt that the police perceived African-Americans as culpable offenders held that officers’ fear of African-Americans and belief that they are guilty was tied to the adoption of black ‘urban’ or ‘street’ culture. That is, black styles of dress, demeanor, and vernacular increased the likelihood that individuals would be perceived as suspicious by the police. Mike, a black male, said, ‘if I’m out here sagging with my pants, I’m a target, period.’ Keanu, an African-American man, agreed, asserting that police are ‘automatically thinking the worst, especially if they [blacks] dress in the typical hip-hop tradition.’ Likewise Clayton, a black male, stated: ‘they [the police] see you [blacks] as like a thug. Like me, I got tattoos, I got dreads, I sag [my pants]. They going to think like you up to no good if you walking or if you in the car.’ Thus, even when young black men were not involved in illicit activity, respondents believed that their attire, demeanor, or language was construed by police as an indicator that they were a potential threat or involved in criminal activity.

Blacks are perceived as worthless by the police

In addition, 37% (N = 30) of protesters in the sample emphasized that law enforcement viewed African-Americans as ‘worthless’ and ‘debased.’ In particular, respondents felt that the police view blacks as inferior to whites. When asked how police view African-Americans in relation to crime, Donte, a black man, responded, ‘black is wrong in the police eye… [and] white is perfect.’ Similarly, Violet, a black woman, believed that law enforcement ‘view us [blacks] lower than the rest of the classes for sure.’ Respondents in the sample typically perceived that officers viewed African-Americans as animalistic. Javon, an African-American male, surmised, ‘I think they don’t view us as citizens, I think they view us [as] animals.’ Susanna, a black female, replied, ‘I think they view us as dogs. Our lives are worthless. They don’t think that we matter. They don’t care for us.’ And Breanne said blacks are generally viewed by officers ‘as a threat [that needs] to be contained. Not as a human being.’

In line with the findings related to the notion that the police perceive blacks as guilty, nearly half (N = 14) of those who believed law enforcement viewed blacks as worthless suggested that negative stereotypes stemmed from deeply embedded histories of racial oppression. Indeed, recent research has illustrated how the historical dehumanization of African-Americans persists among both members of the general public and among police officers (Goff et al. 2014). This history is reflected in the derogatory manner that respondents reported that police spoke to them. Javon, a black male, lamented, ‘I had [an] officer from the police department call me nigger before, ‘go back to where you come from, nigger shit,’ you know what I’m saying.’ And Diamond, an African-American woman, reported that she heard from another source that the former Chief of police called ‘black people monkeys or animals.’ Devanta, an African-American male said: ‘the police look at me a whole different way because of my skin color.’ He continued:

I just feel like the police, just off our skin color, the police feel like we a threat… I really don’t want my skin color to represent who I am ‘cause you know if I tell you now if me and [the] police sit here at this table right now he would look at me talk to me so different because of my skin color and I wouldn’t want that. I would want you to talk to me like you talk to your fellow worker or one of your employees or how you talk to your family. Don’t use my skin color against me. And I just feel that they do that. I feel that they look at African Americans differently than they look at Caucasians or Mexicans or Hispanics.
In sum, some respondents’ view blacks present day experiences with the police as connected to their history of racial oppression in America.

**Ferguson protesters’ perceptions of how the police view whites in relation to crime**

**Whites are perceived as innocent by the police**

In opposition to the way they thought blacks were viewed by the police, some of the respondents in our sample felt that officers perceived whites as ‘innocent,’ ‘superior,’ and as ‘less threatening’ than African-Americans. For example, 31% \((N = 25)\) of all respondents felt that police viewed whites as blameless and above suspicion. Brittany, a black woman, stated, ‘I feel like police officers view white people … like they’re not capable of doing wrong or they’re not capable of committing a crime.’ Similarly, Malik, a black male, said officers view whites as ‘not with suspicion’ and Darnell, a black man, said ‘they think they can do no wrong.’ Of those who believed that officers view whites as innocent, nearly one-third \((N = 8 \text{ or } 32\%)\) believed that race was a contributing factor to such favorable perceptions of whites. Shandra, an African-American woman, complained, that white people ‘get away with murder. They can do whatever they want in this town.’ She provided a hypothetical situation:

I can be a prostitute. She can be a prostitute. They’ll let her get off with a ticket probably. She’d probably have 15 times they get caught on. I get caught one time, I’m going to pay a healthy fine, go to jail and probably be on papers. She won’t … because she’s white and not black.

Likewise, Shaniqua recalled, ‘You know like that white lady killed them kids, the first thing she did was [say] it was a black man, and she killed her own kids … I just feel like they try to throw us in there somehow. It was them … They’re white. There’s no way.’ Shaniqua referred to Susan Smith, a white woman who murdered her two sons in 1994. This case gained national attention because of her claim that an African-American male kidnapped her kids, which proved false. However, according to DeShawn, such claims occur because America is a ‘white society.’

For that reason, 20% \((N = 5)\) of those who thought police viewed whites as innocent believed that police officers viewed them as model citizens. When asked how officers view whites in relation to crime, Jasmine, an African-American female, responded, ‘they feel they’re not criminals.’ As a result of such perceptions, she sarcastically questioned, ‘why would I harass good, upstanding, taxpaying citizens?’ Latoya, a black woman, stated, ‘I feel like whites, Caucasians, they get treated like reasonable logical thinking people. People that are trying to be good members of the community.’

Since they were viewed as model citizens, 20% \((N = 5)\) of respondents who believed police viewed whites as innocent perceived that whites were less likely to be profiled by law enforcement. Latoya stated: ‘when the police … do a routine neighborhood watch thing, they linger around my house and my African American [neighbors] house a lot more than they linger around the white people’s house.’ Even when caught engaging in illegitimate activity, some believed whites were more apt to get off the hook compared to their black counterparts. In his discussion on how police perceive whites, Keanu, an African-American male, said:

[T]hey probably view them as law abiding citizens for the most part if they dress appropriately. I’ve seen this because I’ve been home and see how they treat different people with different type dress. Even that, they’re treated different. Even some white guys that might be on drugs or something like that, they may let them go where a black guy, that might do the same thing, they would arrest him for the same thing.

Keanu tied his belief that officers treat whites differently to his personal observation. His remark was linked to how clothing attire can affect both how one is treated by law enforcement and the outcome once contact with the police has been made. Thus, not surprisingly, a few believed officers provided greater levels of legal protection and security to whites. Tray, a black male, complained: ‘the police are trying to protect them [whites]. They be like they’re taxpayers and they need to be protected and they – they have a job to protect those people. But at the same time, there are other people that are in the black community that are taxpayers and we don’t get the same recognition.’ Overall, few blacks in the study viewed police as guardians that they could rely on (see Waddington and Braddock 1991, 42).
Whites are perceived as superior race by the police

In addition, 13% (N = 11) believed that whites received preferential treatment because they were viewed as superior to blacks. This sentiment was held solely among black respondents. In her discussion of white people, Monique said officers ‘feel that they’re better than us. They feel that they’re better than blacks.’ Likewise, Yolanda stated, ‘I think they [police] think very highly of them [whites].’ Others even considered class status across race. Diamond asserted, ‘I’ve seen some of what they consider white trash be treated bad or you know, get some of the same treatment. In general, I would say that they treat them a lot better.’ Though Diamond acknowledged that whites with low socioeconomic status still incur poor treatment at the hands of officers, she concluded that black people still received worse treatment. Concerns about differential treatment were reported by respondents who felt that whites benefited from the criminal justice system while blacks were more likely to be profiled, arrested, prosecuted, and incarcerated.

Moreover, four black protesters in the sample felt that white people received greater levels of respect from the police. Javon said officers treat whites ‘[m]ore respectful because, I guess, they see their own color.’ Porsha agreed: ‘I have seen the policeman relate to the whites a little bit differently than they do to us. You know it’s the respect. It’s their approach, they don’t have no peaceful and respectful approach against us.’ Similarly, Rachel lamented that while officers ‘talk to them [whites] in a professional manner … [t]hey talk to us [blacks] as if we’re some kind of dirt.’ Generally, it was perceived that officers were much more likely to treat whites in a respectful and professional manner compared to blacks.

Whites are perceived as less threatening by the police

Similarly, eight respondents felt that the police view whites as less threatening than blacks. Dylan, a white male, admitted, ‘I would definitely say overall whites probably appear less threatening and less criminal to most police officers.’ Police ‘view whites as non-threatening [and] harmless’ said Willie, a black male. As a result, white assailants were believed to fare much better than blacks. Deja, a black female, claimed:

I mean, any TV show you looked at, you can look at cops and if there was an African-American on there and they were telling him stop or we’ll shoot, they just shoot first. But I’ve seen TV programs and even on the news where they’ve told Caucasians stop, stop, you know, you need to stop. You know, stop, stop, a thousand times before taking any action.

It is clear from these accounts that many respondents believed that the social system privileges whites over blacks.

In sum, respondents in our study who perceived that officers viewed whites as innocent and emphasized the notion of white potential and goodness. In other words, whites were perceived as non-criminal by nature, resulting in a reduced likelihood of being profiled, arrested, convicted, and incarcerated. In addition, Ferguson protesters held that law enforcement believed that whites were superior to and considered less threatening than blacks, which shaped the way in which whites and blacks are treated in contemporary society. The similarity in respondents’ accounts of law enforcement’s perceptions of race and crime was that whites fared better than blacks in terms of the treatment they received from actors in the criminal justice system.

Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that our sample of Ferguson protesters held a rather nuanced understanding of race, crime, and policing. Indeed, the majority (56%) of respondents did not draw simplistic conclusions about race and crime – that is, most of the respondents in our sample did not view either black or white people as inherently criminal or predisposed to crime. In explaining racial differences in criminal offending, and in explaining their views about how the police perceive members of different racial groups, three key themes arose: racial differences in the nature of criminal offending; the impact
of socioeconomic status on participation in crime; and the impact of media portrayals of crime on citizens' and police officers' perceptions of black criminality. For example, those respondents who argued that participation in crime is not determined by race pointed to differences in the types of crime that black and white people engage in; while black people were believed to engage in petty crimes, whites were thought to engage in more complex crimes, such as embezzlement and corporate fraud. Similarly, respondents who did not view crime as unique to one's race raised socioeconomic status as an important factor influencing the nature of crime. These respondents argued that blacks generally participate in petty crimes out of financial need, while whites typically engage in corporate crimes out of opportunity. Media portrayals of crime were also an important factor among those who did not racially typify crime. In arguing that blacks and whites commit crimes at similar rates, these respondents suggested that the media pays disproportionate attention to crimes committed by black people, thus leading to commonly held beliefs about the criminal propensity of blacks. Importantly, these media depictions were thought not only to affect public sentiment, but also to result in blacks' disproportionate levels of contact with the police and the remainder of the criminal justice system.

A small proportion of respondents did believe that black people engaged in more crime than white people and vice versa (19 and 22%, respectively). In explaining the criminal proclivities of black people, these respondents again suggested that low socioeconomic status – an increased likelihood of being poor – increased blacks participation in crime. Media depictions of crime also solidified this belief among respondents with this view. Interestingly, all but one of the respondents who thought blacks commit more crime than whites were black themselves. This finding may point to the impact that racialized news coverage has on citizens' perceptions of crime. Alternatively, a belief that blacks commit more crime than whites could be the product of the respondents' lived experiences in high-crime neighborhoods. While neither hypothesis is tested here, this finding does help explain why some black people show support for tough on crime policies, even in light of evidence of racial discrimination in the criminal justice system (Peffley and Hurwitz 2010). Nevertheless, our findings reveal that a minority of respondents in the sample believed whites commit more crimes than blacks, owing to the nature of criminal offending and media depictions. Some believed whites committed more heinous crimes than blacks while others believed that there was a greater tendency for the media to focus on crimes largely committed by blacks. While the mass media may portray African-Americans as largely responsible for crime, a small proportion of respondents in our sample refused to accept such depictions as reality.

It is evident that the respondents in this study view the police as biased against black people. These findings are in line with earlier research (Zeitz 1964; Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Weitzer and Tuch 2006). Our findings illustrate that a large proportion of the Ferguson protesters in our sample view the police as protecting the interests and well-being of whites while simultaneously harming blacks, both physically and otherwise (Waddington and Braddock 1991). While blacks were viewed as guilty of criminal activity and worthless, respondents felt the police viewed whites as innocent, superior, and less threatening. The effect of these disparate views on the part of the police, respondents believed, was that black people were racially profiled, and subjected to harsher treatment and less respect. Conversely, our respondents believed that the police protected the interests of whites, amounting to less harassment and more respect. These findings are important to the present study because this data was gathered in the wake of the social unrest in Ferguson, Missouri sparked by the death of black teenager Michael Brown at the hands of white police officer Darren Wilson; an act that many saw as evidence of police discrimination. It should be noted here that our interpretations are based on data reflecting the respondents' subjective judgments about police behavior that may or may not accurately reflect objective police action (Dai, Frank, and Sun 2011). Nevertheless, as documented below, citizens' subjective perceptions of police behavior have been shown to strongly influence citizens' attitudes towards the police (Tyler 2003; Tankebe 2013).7

Prior research has illustrated that how citizens view the police and the actions of police officers are important for a number of reasons. First, as the states' most visible representatives, the police symbolize a cornerstone in a democratic society and citizen confidence in the institution is necessary for democracy to flourish. Conversely, negative attitudes towards the police can lead citizens to question both
the legitimacy of the police and the state whose laws they enforce (Tyler 2003). On the one hand, if the police are perceived to treat citizens in a fair and respectful (procedurally just) manner, they are more likely to be viewed as a legitimate authority. On the other hand, if citizens are treated unfairly they are likely to lose or lack legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Sunshine and Tyler 2003).

Perceptions of police legitimacy can have two important implications for the police and society at large. First, just as the public is reliant on the police to solve and deter crime, so too are the police reliant on the public to cooperate as victims, witnesses and the accused (Tyler and Fagan 2008). Reluctance on the part of the public to cooperate with the police hampers efforts to control crime and to maintain social order (Decker 1981; Murty et al. 1990; Kaukinen and Colavecchia 1999). Second, there is growing concern that perceived injustice can itself cause criminal offending, as such behavior can be justified in light of disrespectful or discriminatory actions of state agents or in defiance of such actions (Tyler 1990; LaFree 1998). Similarly, perceptions of police bias can result in social unrest; the mass public demonstrations, including peaceful protests and violent rioting, following the police shooting of Michael Brown and others since the summer of 2014 provides clear evidence of this. So, too, does the unrest sparked by the perceived oppressive policing of minority group members that has taken place since the 1960s in countries, such as the USA, the UK, and France (Murty et al. 1990; Schneider 2008; Waddington and King 2009). Indeed, we see a pattern of large-scale social unrest following well-publicized instances of police abuse involving racial minorities across geographical contexts.

However, it should be noted that our respondents did not view police discrimination as an isolated phenomenon. Instead the respondents argue that the police treatment of blacks and whites respectively is reflective of broader social inequalities and of discrimination in society at large. Many poor blacks are blocked from legitimate avenues of success, through education and gainful employment; thus, they are at an increased likelihood of engaging in crime to which the police must then respond. The respondents also seem to recognize that the police play an important role in reproducing the inequality present in American society – by targeting the crimes of blacks, either justified or due to discrimination, they continue to criminalize the group; thus, decreasing their chances of advancement in the legitimate economy (Harris 1999). In their responses, it is also clear the Ferguson protesters captured in our sample do not view the shooting of Michael Brown, nor the police treatment of blacks more generally as occurring in a historical vacuum. Indeed, they recognize that how the police view and treat black citizens is reflective of the history of race relations in the USA – both how that has impacted the social position of blacks and the meanings attached to ‘blackness’. This is apparent in the language of ‘worthless’, ‘spoiled’ and ‘animalistic’ that respondents used to describe how they believe the police view blacks and the connection of police treatment of blacks today with slavery and Jim Crow (see also Wacquant 2002; Alexander 2010).

Although the research results are unique, several caveats must be considered. First, the location and characteristics of respondents’ previous neighborhoods, as well as how much televisions news responded were exposed to was not collected and remain an important omission, which may impact to what extent respondents racially typify crime. Future research would benefit from the inclusion of both of these variables. Second, two-thirds of our sample was recruited through the use of social media, which may bias the results towards those who have access to this form of media. For example, users of social media may be younger than the general population, and perhaps more aware of social justice issues that are often broadcast through this medium. Third, the interviews are retrospective, which raises concerns about reliability and validity associated with recall bias, memory loss, and distortion. Finally, as is customary with qualitative research designs, the sampling strategy means that our findings are not generalizable. Specifically, our study is specific to protesters in a disadvantaged suburban community. Though we cannot claim that our findings are generalizable, the study provides rich, detailed, and descriptive information of Ferguson protesters’ views of how the police perceive race and crime, and to what extent they racially typify crime.

Overall, we observed that the majority of our respondents did not racially typify crime, but had strongly held beliefs that the police did. The Ferguson protesters’ captured in our sample connected
the negative perceptions of blacks held by the police to broader social inequalities rooted in American history. In other words, the social unrest in Ferguson was not simply in response to the death of Michael Brown, but rather widespread racial and social injustice on the part of the police and larger society that produced the conditions in which this young man was killed. Our findings suggest that protesters would like to see greater effort being made to improve police–community relations and in tackling the social, economic, and political issues that contribute to violence in urban and suburban neighborhoods, such as unemployment, under-employment, poverty, and lack of resources. Having taken place at a time when many Americans were celebrating the 60th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision and other Civil Rights Movement victories, the racially charged unrest that has occurred since the shooting of Michael Brown may indicate that there is still a way to go in tending to the ‘major unfinished business of the nation’ and making ‘good on the promises of American democracy to all citizens’ (National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders 1968).

Notes
1. African-Americans are over-represented in comparison to their representation in the general US population.
2. The team included the first author and one male and one female graduate student. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the first author’s academic institution.
3. Ten themes were identified regarding respondents’ perceptions of race and crime, 14 for reasons for such perceptions, and 3 for effect/consequences.
4. Two respondents either were not asked or did not answer the question: ‘Do you think blacks are more or less likely to commit crimes than whites. Two respondents responded that they did not know the answer to the question that was posed.
5. Two respondents reported that the era of slavery and Jim Crow were reasons blacks engaged in more crimes than whites.
6. Fewer than 5% (N = 1) of respondents reported that racism, black criminality, citizen demeanor, fear, socio-economic status, history, and a reduced likelihood of getting away with crime were reasons why blacks engage in less crimes than whites.
7. Tankebe (2013), for example, distinguishes between an evaluation of objective and subjective behavior. Objective evaluations could be based on formal data gathered from police action (a combination of field observation and relevant official data, for example), without directly examining people’s feelings. Subjective assessments, currently the dominant mode of inquiry, by contrast, rely on surveys and interviews with members of the public to uncover their feelings about the police and other justice agencies (Tankebe 2013: 112–113). Although subjective assessments of the police may not accurately reflect objective police behavior, the former are nonetheless important in citizens’ formation of attitudes towards the police and perceptions of procedural justice (Sunshine and Tyler 2003; Tyler 2003). As the old adage goes ‘our perceptions form our reality.’

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors
Jennifer E. Cobbina is an associate professor in the School of Criminal Justice at Michigan State University. Her research interests focus on gender and prisoner reentry, desistance, and recidivism. Her work also examines the intersection of gender, race, class, and crime. Jennife’s work has appeared in Criminology, Justice Quarterly, Crime and Delinquency, Deviant Behavior, and Race and Justice.

Akwasi Owusu-Bempah is an assistant professor of Criminal Justice at Indiana University, Bloomington. His research is focused in the areas of: policing; youth marginalization and exclusion; and politics, crime, and justice. Akwasi’s work has recently appeared in BMC Public Health, Policing and Society, and the Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

Kimberly Bender is a visiting assistant professor in the Department of Criminology and Justice Studies at the University of Massachusetts Lowell. Her research interests include women in prison; prisoner reentry; and the intersections of race, class, gender, and crime. Her work has appeared in Journal of Offender Rehabilitation and the International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.
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