Police-Community Relations in Times of Crisis: Decay and Reform in the Post-Ferguson Era

SUMMARY

The lens through which police-community interactions are viewed was forever changed on August 9th, 2014 when Ferguson (MO) Police Officer Darren Wilson shot and killed Michael Brown.

Though tragic, these types of events (i.e. the killing of unarmed, young, black, men by law enforcement) are far too common. Familiarity, however, was not met with complacency in Ferguson as the world watched peaceful and violent protests and the beginnings of a larger social justice movement.

To better understand these events, *Police-Community Relations in Times of Crisis* begins by situating Ferguson in a broader historical context of injustice, while acknowledging law enforcement's impossible mandate. Ethnographic data and interviews with law enforcement, defense lawyers, prosecutors, clergy, social workers, youth coaches, outreach workers, and young men of color explain – in their own words – the lasting implications of this history and the events in Ferguson.

The hope, in presenting raw, authentic, and diverse perspectives is to create a shared understanding of the nuances to police-community relations. The voices presented are discussed within the context of contemporary issues, such as the influence of COVID-19 and the subsequent death of George Floyd by Minneapolis (MN) police officer Derek Chauvin.
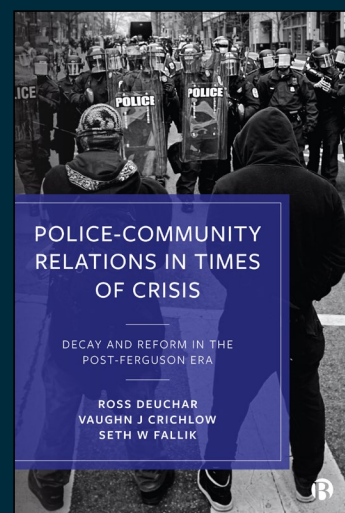
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RESULTS/CONCLUSIONS/KEY FINDINGS

In these data, officers referred to the pressures and frustrations that stemmed from constantly being under scrutiny. There was concern regarding a Ferguson Effect (MacDonald, 2016) and we found that some police officers were less inclined to be proactive for fear of being labeled a racist (Wolfe & Nix, 2016). Many also believed that community and family values had deteriorated, that there was an absence of positive male role models, and young people lacked discipline/showed little respect for authority. This perspective was shared by social workers, clergy, and other practitioners who worked with justice-involved youths. Racial and ethnic minority young men indicated that they lived in low-income communities, disorganized homes, and were deprived of positive influences. When these young men encountered police, they reported a spirit of antagonism: law enforcement were frustrated and disrespected and young Black men felt desperate, deprived, and angry.

There was a view among some of the law enforcement participants that President Obama was not supportive of law enforcement during his tenure as President. Alternatively, many officers believed that President Trump would be an enthusiastic supporter of the police (Deuchar et al., 2018). Officers preferred a tough-on-crime approach to the criminal justice system, which was reflected in the fieldwork observations of officers embracing a 'warrior'-style of policing. The officers who supported this approach saw themselves primarily as enforcers of the law engaged in a good versus evil battle against civilians (McLean et al., 2019). It was clear during our participant observations that some officers were conscious of the need to become 'guardians' rather than warriors. These officers were willing to incorporate proactive strategies to build and sustain legitimacy among community members. One of the agencies involved in the research provided a strong example of the police-as-guardians approach. Street dialogue with youth, the creation of mentorship opportunities through recreational activities, and the provision of community assistance for families, were some of the methods deployed to bridge the confidence gap in law enforcement.

Despite these efforts, many of the justice-involved young Black men who were interviewed were still suspicious of the police and believed that officers were racist due to their direct and vicarious experiences with law enforcement. In fact, they feared retaliation if they were to violate the commonly embraced 'no snitching' rule by reporting crimes to the police. This street code (Anderson, 1999), along with the trauma of abuse and neglect, appeared at times to exert a greater influence on youth behavior than the attempts by the authorities to engage them with community-building programs. Community outreach initiatives, though beneficial in many ways, could not accomplish sustainable improvements in perceptions of legitimacy, safety, or willingness to cooperate with the police without the resources, training, and the inter-agency partnerships that are crucial for dealing with longstanding core issues and grievances that impact troubled residents (Maguire & Katz, 2002).
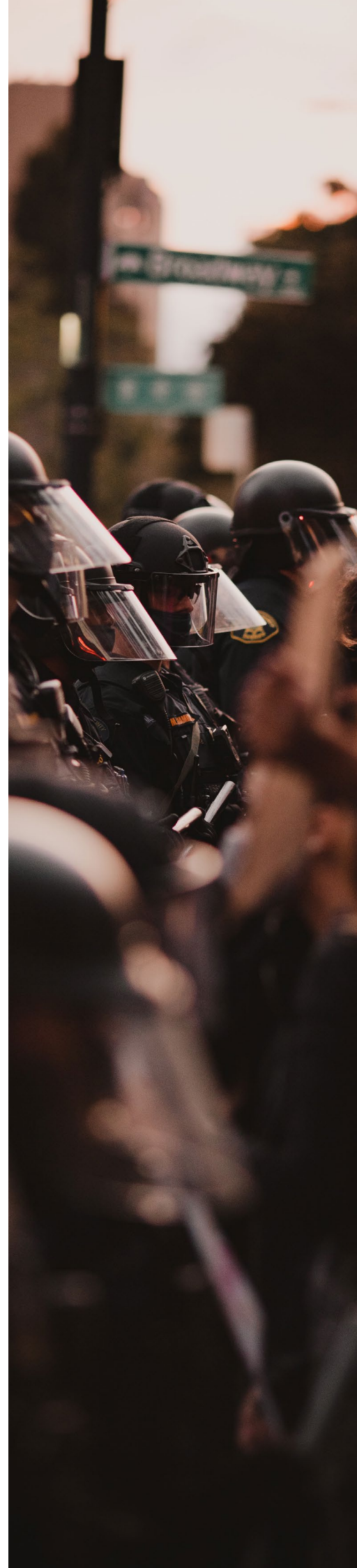
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, along with growing public outrage for the frequency and unjust nature of police violence, it is likely that community-based initiatives will not be sufficient to stem the decay in police-community relations. To address these challenges, we present the following recommendations:

- **A comprehensive procedural justice plan:** A comprehensive agency-wide plan that incorporates procedural justice principles could yield much needed results. A comprehensive plan must be community-informed. While there may be many examples of agencies that have implemented procedurally just practices, there are few examples of comprehensive reforms based on established values between police and community members. Neighborhood representatives should be invited to partner with police leaders to foster collaborative approaches. These approaches should be based on fairness in the processes, transparency in actions, opportunities for voice, and impartiality in decision-making. If procedural justice is not coupled with organizational change then we will likely not achieve the benefits of healthy police-community relations. It is therefore suggested that each step of the process be evaluated by independent partners to ensure model fidelity.

- **Transparency in cases of officer misconduct:** Police departments are encouraged to be more transparent in the aftermath of incidents of police violence involving residents. This will go a long way towards healing the divide between police agencies and minority communities. The community should also be included in discussions about officer conduct with an emphasis on standards for the use of force. Greater transparency on police use of force decisions will lead to fruitful conversations between the police and the community. In the absence of such forums, reports on suspensions and firings of officers who are in violation of codes of conduct will not be sufficient to build trust in the community.

- **Reinforcing police accountability:** If police are not adhering to an official code of conduct then there is a need to reinforce the mechanisms that hold police accountable. Police leaders should be empowered to deal with disciplinary issues in collaboration with oversight boards, police unions, and fraternities. This can be achieved while maintaining a transparent system of due process.

- **Re-imagining resource allocation:** The movement to defund police, though well-intentioned, might be tone deaf to the needs of some local communities. Some police agencies will need more targeted funding to improve the quality of the services they provide and build legitimacy perceptions among community members. It is also a sad reality that agencies with the greatest financial need often exist in the most challenging environments. Local leaders are, therefore, encouraged to work with municipalities to re-imagine resource allocation in a prescribed manner that will not undermine the efforts of law enforcement and prioritizing long-term strategies rather than typical reactionary crime reduction efforts. Calls for service that do not require a traditional law enforcement response could, for example, be overseen by professionals who are trained to help residents access the care and support that they need.

- **Public-private sector partnerships:** All voices should be included in local forums designed to bring healing and restoration, and such forums should lead to a coalition of public and private partnerships that can effectively engage in advocacy for police and community reforms. The private sector must, therefore, be a part of the equation when it comes to the creation of social support networks that provide access to education, healthcare, and employment, and to enhance the future prospects for vulnerable families in disadvantaged neighborhoods.

A comprehensive procedural justice plan implemented alongside a multi-agency, community-informed improvement strategy, could provide solutions desperately needed by many communities across the country. It is impossible for police to effectively fulfil a public safety mandate without such partnerships. Clearly, the challenge of improving police-community relations cannot be achieved without also addressing the deeply rooted issues that have festered for generations in many of America's urban centers.

About the book

The deaths of Michael Brown and George Floyd at the hands of white police officers have uncovered an apparent legitimacy crisis at the heart of American policing. Drawing on interviews with officers, offenders, practitioners and community members, this book explores policing changes in the 'post-Ferguson' era and informs future policing practice.

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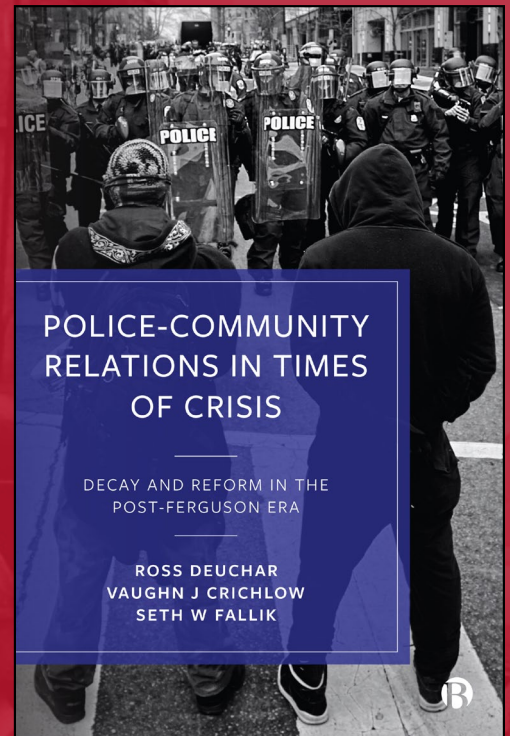
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