NEIGHBORHOOD DISORGANIZATION AND POLICE DECISION-MAKING IN THE NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the applicability of criminological theory to police decision-making during police-initiated encounters with suspects. Specifically, how indicators of social disorganization can be used to predict officers’ use of coercive action (i.e., frisk, search, use of force, and arrest) during the street stop of suspects. I also investigate whether neighborhood disadvantage, as a moderator, impacts suspects’ likelihood of receiving greater levels of coercive action when stopped for reasons listed in the New York City Police Departments’ Unified Form 250 (UF-250) reports.

Three theoretical arguments connecting an officer’s decision-making in a socially disorganized area are outlined. First, an area with an increased amount of disorganization and crime is believed to have increased levels of police coercive activities, compared to an organized and low crime area, simply based on the amount of police activity occurring in these areas (e.g., Terrill and Reisig, 2003). Second, as a result of the need for police to step in as sources of social control in disorganized areas, police may increase their use of coercive action (e.g., Clear, Rose, Waring, and Scully, 2003). And third, officers’ heavy workload and cynicism toward residents in socially disorganized areas leads to less police coercion in disorganized and high crime areas (e.g., Klinger, 1997).
Two research questions were examined using data collected from the New York Police Department Stop, Question, and Frisk Database, 2011 combined with neighborhood-level census data:

(1) Does neighborhood disorganization play a role in an officer’s decision to frisk, search, use force against, or arrest a suspect?

(2) Does concentrated disadvantage strengthen or weaken the relationship between predictors of a stop and an officer’s decision to frisk, search, use force against, or arrest a suspect?

Three outcomes measures were created, in order to assess whether the contemporary measures of social disorganization (e.g., concentrated disadvantage, residential instability, and concentrated immigration) can be used to predict officer use of coercive action: (1) as a dichotomy of each coercive response occurring or not occurring during the stop (2) on a continuum of coercive action and (3) using the highest level of coercive action that occurred during the stop.

Results from multilevel analyses of stop incidents nested within neighborhoods confirm that certain indicators of social disorganization (e.g., concentrated immigration) affect officer use of coercive action. However, whether concentrated disadvantage strengthens or weakens the relationship between each stop predictor (e.g., suspect fits a relevant description) and officer coercive action (e.g., use of force), remains unknown. The dichotomous and coercive action continuum outcomes reveal that neighborhood disadvantage weakens the relationship between the predictors of a stop and the likelihood of coercive action, while the highest level of coercion used outcome reveals that neighborhood disadvantage strengthens the relationship between the predictors of a stop and the likelihood of coercive action. The contradictory findings may indicate inaccuracy of the UF-250 reports or a conscious decision, on behalf of the officer, to report dissimilarly in disadvantaged versus affluent neighborhoods. Nonetheless, suggestions for future research include a deeper examination into the causes behind these conclusions.