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# Examining the Role of Race, Gender, and Class in African-American Police Perceptions in Rural Kentucky

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By

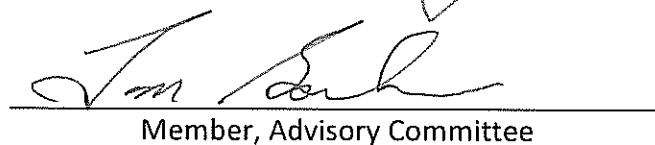
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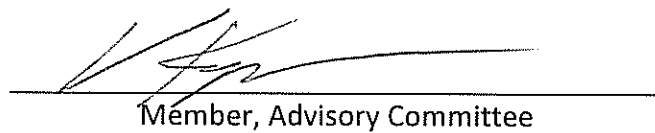
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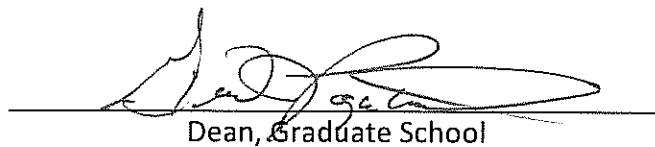
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Examining the Role of Race, Gender, and Class in Police Perceptions in Rural Kentucky

By

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of  
MASTER OF SCIENCE  
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## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife Tanya and my two children, Daniel and Jordan, for their unwavering support during my many hours away from home spent working on this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all of my professors at Easter Kentucky University who played a major part in my Criminal Justice Graduate School experience; Dr. Potter for his always entertaining personality, Dr. Blevins for making a dry subject interesting, Dr. Kraska for setting me on the path to Thesis success, Dr. Minor for aiding me with my theoretical perspective , Dr. Elrod and Dr. Leichtman for showing me a historical perspective on policing that the training academy conveniently left out, Dr. Kappeler for helping me see policing for what it really is, and to Dr. Gray for her intellectual contribution to this work and for work guiding me across the finish line. I would also like to thank the Black community in Lawrenceburg, Kentucky for their patience, understanding, and support during my survey data collection and my interviews. Special thanks to Gail Jones, Hope Bixler, and Ernie Guthrie for opening doors that otherwise would have otherwise been closed to me.

## Abstract

Prior research has consistently demonstrated the role of race in understanding racial and ethnic differences in perceptions of the police. This research has overwhelmingly shown that Blacks and Latinos hold lower levels of trust and confidence in the police than do Whites and other racial minorities. The increased skepticism of the police expressed by minority citizens is commonly associated with racial profiling and documented racial disparities in police behavior. Although policing research has empirically demonstrated the influence of race on perceptions of the police, few studies have explored police perceptions from a rural context. By employing the Citizen's Attitudes Towards Police measure used by Frank, Smith, & Novak (2005), the purpose of this study is to examine whether rural context in evaluating police behavior diverges from what the urban context suggests. The results suggest that similar to Blacks in urban areas, lower-income Blacks hold negative views of police in general. This study also incorporates an intersectional analysis by interrogating the role of gender, age, and neighborhood context in influencing the Black's perceptions of police.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Scholars, policy makers, and the public in general have been growing increasingly interested in the public's attitudes towards police. Police departments have also taken a particular interest in improving relationship among the members in the communities they serve. This is often the case in neighborhoods with ethnically and racially diverse populations where residents generally express more negative views towards the police (Schuck, Rosenbaum, & Hawkins, 2008). Over the years, there have been many studies documenting how minorities perceive the police (Dowler & Sparks, 2008; Hunt, Wise, Jigguet, Cozier & Rosenberg, 2007; Vogel, 2011). Research has focused largely on the unpleasant minority experiences of Blacks and Latinos, concerns over racial profiling, disparate treatment, and disproportionate conviction rates and unfair sentencing practices of minority populations (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). Historically, poor treatment and abuse of African Americans at the hands of the police, has caused many Black citizens to question the legitimacy of police organizations nationwide (Zinn, 1980, Quinney, 1980, & Lucas, 1992, Sheldon 2001). Research shows that blacks are consistently more distrustful of the police, and express more dissatisfaction with them than whites, due to perceived racial bias and unjust treatment (Warren, 2010).

Although these previous studies conducted examining the perception of Blacks attitudes towards police are instrumental and useful, they are mostly conducted within an urban context (Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Khadjavi, 2006; Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2009). There is limited data examining how Black's in rural areas view and perceive police and their local law enforcement. Brown and Benedict (2002) compiled data from over one hundred police perception studies and observed that the little research that does exist on rural police perceptions does not allow for any conclusions to be made on the subject of variances with their urban counterparts. The purpose of

the current study is to fill a gap missing within the literature on how Blacks in rural areas view the police.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### *PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF POLICE*

Research suggests that most Americans hold positive attitudes toward the police. As Pastore & Maguire (2007) explain, Americans have a great deal of confidence in the police, but the data does not tell a complete story. Not all Americans share this positive view of police. A huge distinction that can be made about individual's views towards the police is across racial and ethnic lines (Block, 1971, Hadar and Santorum, 1975, Peek, Lowe, & Alston, 1981, & Parker, Onyekwuluje, & Murty, 1995). There are many factors that contribute leading to this negative view and from the urban context; these factors have been well documented (Fosdick, 1969; Hadar & Snortum, 1975; Decker, 1981; Zamble & Annesley, 1987; Corriea, Reisig, & Lovrich, 1996; Sims, Hooper, & Peterson, 2002; Dowler & Sparks, 2008; Hunt et al., 2007; Vogel, 2011; Cochran & Warren, 2012). Even though the focus of this study is African American perceptions in a sparsely populated rural setting, urban studies provide some valuable insight.

Age and gender have also been shown to effect police perceptions. The majority of studies conducted on age show that young people hold more negative views of the police (Lee, Steinberg, Piquero, & Knight, 2011, Correia et al., 1996). Jefferis, Kaminski, Holmes, and Hanley (1997) found that juveniles are apt to believe that the police use too much force while making an arrest. Khadjavi (2006) found that black youth are very likely to interpret traffic stops as racially biased. Sampson and Bartusch (1998) found that black youth view the police with less legitimacy as do whites. Some studies have found that police perceptions become more negative as age increases (Sims et al., 2002), where others have indicated the opposite with perceptions improving with age (Peek et al., 1981).

The role of gender varies to some degree; although there is not a true consensus, the data is still informative. Huang and Vaughn (1996) found that gender

has no effect on police perceptions. Hadnar and Snortum (1975) found females to have a more favorable view of police, and Correia et al. (1996) found the opposite. Sims et al., (1999) found that gender is directly related to individual levels of fear of crime and victimization, with females consistently more fearful than males. Although these studies don't offer a compelling argument towards gendered views of police, they are still informative in explaining how men and women perceive the police through this lens.

Some studies have indicated that socioeconomic factors, such as income and education, can influence police perceptions. Sampson and Bartusch (1999) found that individuals with lower levels of economic disadvantage, both Black and White, were less likely to view the police favorably. According to Frank, Smith, and Novak (2005), individuals who rent their homes, have lower levels of household income, and have lower levels of education all express less police satisfaction, regardless of race. Boggs and Galliher (1975) compared transient populations within the African-American community finding that these populations held negative perceptions of police. Sampson and Bartusch (1998) found that individuals with lower income had lower satisfaction with the police, although Correia et al (1996) found that social class had no impact on police perceptions. And interestingly, Weitzer and Tuch (1999) found that the more education and individual had, the less favorably they viewed the police.

Instrumental to the current context, studies have also examined neighborhood context in individual's perception of police. Specifically, Weitzer (2000) found that city condition, fear of crime, and population density all had the ability to contribute to either positive or negative perceptions of police to varying degrees. Huang and Vaughan (1996) found high levels of general police dissatisfaction in poor neighborhoods. According to Sampson and Bartush (1998) residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods express high levels of legal cynicism. Nofziger & Williams (2005) examined community perceptions of police and safety in a small town and found young black males had a much lower confidence level of the police and their ability to provide them with safety as compared to both females and white populations. Apple and O'Brien (1983) found

that deteriorating neighborhood conditions and the population density both negatively affected minority perceptions of the police. This research shows the strong connection between class, gender, and race. Again, these perceptions are situated within the urban context.

Previous police contact has been shown in many prior studies to be a strong indicator of negative perceptions of law enforcement. One study examined minority perceptual differences towards different police agencies and found that negative perceptions were directly related to police-citizen contacts, with city police departments having a more negative outlook as a result of frequent encounters, as opposed to the Sheriff's Office and the State Police departments (Warren, 2010). Brunson (2007) indicated that City police departments were more likely to engage in a pattern of aggressive patrol of poor neighborhoods and this fostered both resentment as well as perceptions of racial bias. A study done on urban black youth found that if police attitudes during the initial contact were authoritative and disrespectful, the suspected juvenile was likely to become combative, non-compliant, and verbally abusive (Brunson & Miller, 2006). In this study juveniles were found to have overwhelmingly negative perceptions of the police, and this was due to the predominant belief that the contact was a result of racial profiling and therefore unwarranted. Another study by Tyler (2005) also found that negative experiences with the police were contingent upon the attitude of the officer during the initial contact, as well as the perceived fairness of the outcome of the encounter. Nofziger & Williams (2005) found that black men who had experienced a police contact within the past year, when compared to blacks with no recent contact, had a much lower level of confidence in the police than did whites. The study also revealed that positive police interactions equated to higher levels of confidence in the police. This finding is significant because it indicates that the quality of the contact with the police considerably increases or decreases the confidence levels among the black population. One study stated that individual police personal attributes (disrespectful, hostile, fair, and polite) strongly affected their perceptions. The study also indicated response times for calls of assistance were a common determinant of

perceptions of the police in general, with slow response times equating to negative perceptions, and fast ones to positive perceptions (Frank et al., 2005).

Vicarious experiences are a huge determinant of black perceptions of the police. Prior research has shown that black social circles share more negative stories of police contacts. Sixty six percent of African Americans versus just 13 percent of whites share personal stories with others of the same race about police misconduct. Eighty two percent of blacks believe that racial profiling is rampant amongst police departments (Weitzer & Tuch, 1999). According to Schafer, Huebner, and Bynum (2003), for citizens who have no routine contact with the police, vicarious experiences help mold perceptions, and indicate the importance of culture and context in shaping them. Members of the black community may have predisposed perceptions of the police based on, “collective experiences and norms within the neighborhoods” (Schafer et al, 2003, p. 447). One study suggested that perceptions of police misconduct and racial profiling of minorities may, in part, be due to the media and social construction (Graziano, Schuck, & Martin, 2009). This study examined the possibility that journalists and media groups construct problems in ways to promote ideologies, and that this may drive public perception of a nonexistent problem.

Although previous research has found that race is a strong predictor of police perceptions, other factors such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status matter as well. What these studies have failed to incorporate is an intersecting focus showing the amplification effect of these different identities in perceptions of police. So by combining the role of race, class, neighborhood context, among other identities, this research will in part show this intersecting focus towards police perceptions in a poor, Black, rural area. But before proceeding with the intersectionality as a guiding theoretical framework, it is imperative to historically situate the location of the current study.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORICAL AND RACIAL OVERVIEW OF RACE AND POLICING IN THE AREA OF STUDY

Slave patrols were developed by the southern colonies as a means of maintaining and “policing” the institution of slavery. The slave patrol concept and the function of apprehending runaway slaves and protecting white populations from slave insurrections is believed by some scholars to be the precursor to the modern American system of policing, particularly in the southern States (Shelden, 2001). While no specific mention of “slave patrols” is mentioned in the history of the rural area of the study (which will be referred to as Minden, KY and Minden County, KY), there is record of an individual being appointed as captain of the patrol during slavery. It is highly likely that this man along with his patrolmen played the role of Nigh Watch alongside slave patrol (McKee, 1977).

In 1790 when the first white man settled in Minden, there were about 12,000 slaves in Kentucky. In 1798 the first slave code that strictly regulated the movement of slaves was adopted in Kentucky, and in the early 1800’s, Lexington operated slave patrols from 10:00 P.M. to 6:00 A.M. to arrest bondsmen violating curfew. Virtually all counties operated slave patrols to monitor travel, watch suspected gathering places, and look for runaways. State law mandated that the counties bordering the Ohio River guard local crossings and arrest on sight any slave found loitering in its vicinity (Lucas, 1992). The close proximity of Minden to these areas and the Ohio River indicates a high probability of slave patrol activity in the area. According to the 1830 US Census, Minden County had 1,083 slaves which comprised over 20 percent of the total population of the county at the time (Lucas, 1992). Presently the black population is approximately 433 (US Census). This is less than one percent of the total population in Minden County. Over time, there has been a great migration of Blacks out of Minden County and, although there is no documented evidence of this occurring, it is plausible that the



decline was a result of ethnic cleansing described in the book, “Buried in the Bitter Waters: the Hidden History of Ethnic Cleansing in America” by Elliot Jaspin (2007).

Post-Civil War and the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment outlawing slavery in December of 1865 left Blacks in a precarious position. Federal law proclaimed their freedom, yet locals still considered them fugitives and property. Slave patrols evolved into groups called moderators, guerillas, regulators, night riders, and the Klu Klux Klan (Lucas, 1992). Lynch mobs and gangs roamed freely, especially in rural areas, beating, murdering, and intimidating Blacks and Union whites. Between 1867 and 1871, a neighboring newspaper reported 115 hangings, shootings, and whippings in their county, just outside of Minden. Many incidences of violence occurred in isolated rural areas and were never reported. This type of behavior persisted unchecked because both white citizens and local government officials were complicit and protected one another (Lucas, 1992). There is no documented evidence of these things happening in Minden County, but three facts make it likely that it did: the presence of a large slave population in relation to the number of whites; the remoteness of the Minden area; and the fact that the KKK continued to openly demonstrate in Minden County as recently as 1982 (Minden County News, December 1982). The slave patrols in Minden evolved into the modern police system that exists today. Until 1970, the local police department and the Sheriff’s office both operated small departments of no more than 3 officers and support staff. During the mid-1980’s, like many rural areas, there was a pattern of growth mirroring national trends of increased budgets, increased militaristic policing, 24 hour patrol, and increased services. With all the changes that occurred in urban policing contexts, the same occurred in rural context. So in addition to the racial issues inherent in urban policing centers, these same issues will be examined in the current study.

#### *Comparing Urban and Rural Perceptions of Crime*

In order to conduct a study on perceptions of the police in rural areas, as opposed to urban ones, it is necessary to understand some of the differences between the two. According to Ball (2001) the term rural, not only refers to areas of low density population and small population numbers, but different cultural attitudes and beliefs as

well. Ball (2001) found that rural residents not only view crime differently than urban ones, they are also less fearful of being victimized by crime and have more positive police relations than their counterpart. According to Ball (2001), many rural adults and youth do not consider crime and disorder pressing problems within the community. According to the US 2010 Census the total population in the area of the study is 21,421. Ninety-six percent of the total population is White, and less than 2 percent Black. The remaining three percent is Latino, Asian, and Native American. Of the total black population, 370 reside within the limits of the county seat. Eighty-seven percent of the total population over the age of 25 has a high school diploma and 17 percent have a bachelor's degree or higher. Eleven percent of the total population lives below the poverty level. According to Information obtained from the Board of Education Family Resource Coordinator, 45 percent of all students in the County School District are on Free and Reduced Lunch. To qualify for this program the student must reside in a household that is below the Federal Poverty Line.

The area of the study is referred to by many as a "bedroom community." Situated within commuting distance to Kentucky's major cities, the majority of its residents are employed outside the community. Though there are several large private industries located in the area, the largest employer in the county is the Board of Education. According to the 2010 US Census the per capita income is \$24,516, and the median household income is \$55,506. Home ownership rate is 76.3 percent and the average home value is \$131,000.

According to the Kentucky Uniform Crime Reports (1970 to the present) the area of the study is a very safe place to live. The crime rate for the serious crimes of murder, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, and auto theft is consistently less than half the State average. The crime rate for Larceny, drug offenses, and DUI convictions are consistent with State levels over the same forty three year period.

This site of study is not comparable to most sites in other studies and it will be interesting to examine the similarities and differences that emerge. What does not change between studies are the overall historical experiences of African-American's in

the United States. Examining their realities through an intersectional framework is necessary to situate their experiences especially with the institutional of criminal justice.

## CHAPTER 4

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Intersectionality guides the theoretical foundation of this project. Any study that examines the lives of Blacks in the United States must incorporate this focus to truly capture the lived experiences of both Black men and women. Their experiences must also be understood in the context of the historical position of enslavement and failed liberation and emancipation as the literature briefly highlighted.

There are certain historical experiences that set Blacks apart from other groups: 1) their African commonality, 2) the shared history of slavery, 3) racism and discrimination, and 4) the victim system set up by mainstream society to deny access, advancement, and opportunities to this population (Black 1996). The criminal justice system shares a role in hindering the progressive strides of Blacks and the views that Blacks hold of the criminal justice, although mostly negative, is warranted. Black men and women have the misfortune of having to experience oppression due to their race, class, and for women, their gender. In the context of the current study, their neighborhood context also plays a role in oppressing this population. So intersectionality is necessary to try and understand what their lived realities and lived experiences may be. These things are also instrumental in examining the views that they hold of police.

Although intersectionality was established to examine the dual oppressive status of Black women, this framework is applicable to any marginalized group. King (1995) referred to the dual oppression of racism and gender in the context of multiple jeopardy. Multiple refers to not only the simultaneous oppressions that exist because of race and gender, but also the amplification effect inherent in these identities as well (racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism) (p. 297). Incorporating an intersectional focus allows the unique experiences of marginalized Blacks to be considered and understood.

Intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1994), urges for an examination of the multiple dimensions in the lives of women of color (race, class, gender, education, class, etc). These are all important factors shaping the identities and experiences of marginalize persons in America. Rooted in Black feminist thought, intersectionality finally gives a name to early advocates within abolitionist, women's, and civil rights movements (King 1995). Intersectional theory also privileges the specialized knowledge that Black women hold. Examining the world through their eyes and from their perspective is not only needed but also necessary to understand what privilege and oppression has done to their lives. The common struggle of racism and sexism binds Black women together, and in turn, continues to hold the Black community together providing resilience to the oppression experienced at the hands of the oppressed. As Crenshaw explains, race is an important factor in her life; but it is not the only factor influencing the negative outcomes of her life. Her experiences as a woman are just as salient. In her examination of intimate partner violence, she explains this as identity-based politics which serves as a source of strength for groups with shared commonalities, such as the historical oppression of women. The intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender separately (Crenshaw 1994).

Structural intersectional, which is what concerns this project the most, is concerned the social location of continued victimization of the Black community by the institution of policing. This incorporates the role of race, gender, class, economic factors, education, unemployment, under-employment, access to services, and neighborhood context. This is needed to examine the current realities of Blacks in rural areas. Power structures intersect in these areas of their lives.

This study is also informed by Critical Marxist theory. A Marxist perspective on crime and criminalization states that a system of law created by the State is going to exist to the advantage of the dominant class while simultaneously working against the disadvantaged lower class. The two mechanisms of control utilized by the ruling class are ideology and State sanctioned coercion. A basic assumption is that individuals are

shaped by economic organizational forces and conflict is rooted in economic inequality. A critical analysis focuses on class stratification and economic structure.

When attempting to explain criminalization, the Marxist perspective diverges into two camps; Instrumentalist and Structuralist. Where conflict theorists emphasize political power over economics, Marxist criminology conceptualizes control of the economy as the primary basis of ruling class power. In today's political landscape money is political power. Instrumental Marxists see the law and the criminal justice system as a means (instrument) for the ruling class to maintain their position. Criminalization is the means to dominate, manage, and gain compliance from the working class (proletariat) (Lanier and Henry, 2010). This theme is detailed throughout the book "Controlling the Dangerous Classes: A Critical Introduction to the History of Criminal Justice" by Randall G. Shelden (2001). According to Shelden, the criminal justice system evolved to suppress the working class poor which consisted of recently freed blacks, and Italian, Irish, and Latino immigrants. Structuralist Marxists do not believe that there is one ruling class, but rather competing power factions constantly in a state of tug of war for power.

Structuralists also disagree with the assumption that laws exist solely to the benefit of the ruling elite. Arguably there are many laws in existence such as environmental regulations, labor laws, and anti-trust laws that exist to the benefit of the working class and to the detriment of capital and the ruling economic elite. As part of the capitalist economic structure the State exists to maintain and advance capitalism and not just to protect a privileged class (even though some would argue that the two are the same), and at times, in order to maintain its own legitimacy, the State must side with some issues on behalf of the working class. The working class enjoys some real protections from laws regulating street crimes. In 2008 when the banking collapse threatened the liquidity of financial capital markets the State intervened by providing bailouts to the very institutions guilty of creating the problem in the first place. A unique feature of Marxist criminology is that it explains both criminal behavior as well as criminalization.

### *Application of Marxist Theory to Perceptions of the Police*

The Critical Marxist perspective helps explain the social reality of Blacks as it relates to the history of policing. Particularly in the South during the post emancipation and reconstruction periods, Blacks suffered oppressive social relations and racism that maintained class division. Laws and punishment of crime were connected to a system of social inequality that delegated Blacks to a permanent underclass status and perpetuated an institution of financial and economic slavery. According to Quinney (1980) capitalist societies are dominated by powerful economic interests where the power, wealth, and means of production are concentrated in the hands of a privileged elite class. The inequitable distribution of power and wealth allow the wealthy to use the State's coercive mechanisms (police) to control and criminalize any who threaten, oppose, and undermine the workings of this capitalist economic order. It is this Instrumentalist Marxist concept that allowed the ruling elite in the South to manipulate the system in their favor against a black population that had nothing more than their physical labor to sell.

Consider the historical treatment of Blacks in a white dominated society after the abolition of slavery by the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. In 1865 all former slave states adopted new Black Codes which denied blacks the right to vote, serve on juries, and testify against whites. Their physical labor could only be contracted out on an annual basis and failure to do so would lead to arrest. Some states barred land ownership, certain occupational professions, and allowed judges to award Black children to whites for labor purposes without parental consent. This time period was followed by Jim Crow laws that began around the end of the 19th century (1890) after the Reconstruction period and lasted until the 1960's. These were state and local laws that mandated segregation in all public places. The "separate but equal" segregation was really a systematic economic and educational oppression of blacks. During the Civil Rights Era between 1965 and the mid-Seventies blacks gained some important legal protections. State sponsored public school segregation was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1954 in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and Jim Crow laws were

overturned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights act of 1965. These things were met with wide scale violence and civil disobedience by whites (Lucas, 2003, and Moss and Franklin, 2000). There are some that argue that Jim Crow has simply been replaced by new laws and practices that are oppressive to blacks. In her book “The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness” (2010) author Michelle Alexander argues that drug laws and the “drug wars” are a direct assault on young black males that has resulted in mass incarceration and disproportionate minority confinement of blacks. This is, in turn, a direct contributor to felony disenfranchisement and loss of voting rights for blacks.

All of these things are examples of the concepts described by Critical Marxists. This study is not claiming that Black citizens in the area of the study are all well learned in the concepts discussed by these scholars and therefore have negative views of the police. However, they are intimately aware of the most visible arm of the State that upheld these historically oppressive laws: the police. The Sheriff represents the highest ranking police arm of the State in every county in the U.S. Their presence is especially strong in rural communities in the absence of large metropolitan areas that require large urban police departments. Historically in Minden, it was the Sheriff and his deputies who carried out the coercive measures of the State by whipping slaves (McKee, 1977). There is no reason to believe that punishment for Black Codes and Jim Crow laws were not similarly enforced by the Sheriff over the years in this rural community. This was the most visible extension of the State in the eyes of Black people and it represented coercion in its most brutal and oppressive form.

Blacks in the area of study are also aware of power and their lack of it within local politics and government institutions. In the Counties 186 years of existence there has never been a black mayor, sheriff, judge executive, county court clerk, judge, chief of police, or magistrate. There are currently no black police officers or deputies. There have been four city council members and four black city police officers. The black community sentiments regarding political alienation will be discussed in greater detail in the qualitative finding section of this study.



## CHAPTER 5

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter describes the methodology employed in conducting this study into Black perceptions of police in rural areas. This chapter will explain an overview of the study, continuing on to research questions and hypotheses, the research design, population, sampling procedures, and instrumentation. The chapter ends with a discussion on ethical considerations in studying human subjects and their contribution to this study.

#### *Ethical Considerations*

Procedural controls were maintained for all data collected. The researcher collected and maintained all data implementing safeguards to ensure the security of the participant's identities. Pseudonyms were created to ensure confidentiality. Even the location of the site of study was changed to increase protection of this marginalized population. All participants were informed of their rights before participating. Consent forms were maintained by the researcher. IRB approval was granted prior to conducting interviews or administering surveys.

#### *Overview*

This study employed a mixed method approach consisting of both a quantitative survey and ethnographic interviewing. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to recruit Blacks in this rural Kentucky area. Instrumentation included a measure that assessed citizen's attitudes towards police. Qualitative measurements included a semi-structured questionnaire asking citizens attitudes towards police. Guided by intersectional methodology, this informal method of interviewing allowed for a more narrative approach to data collection privileging the experiences of this marginalized community. Below in Table 1 are the guiding research questions and associated hypotheses:

*Table 1: Research Questions and Hypotheses*

| Research Questions   | Hypotheses  |
|--|---|
| RQ1: What are the overall views of Blacks towards police in rural Kentucky?  | H1: Similar to Blacks in urban areas, I hypothesize that Blacks in rural areas will hold negative views of police because of the racialized history in the area.        |
| RQ2: What influences the negative perceptions of police outside the urban context?   | H2: I hypothesize that media will have a major influence in Blacks perceptions of police in this area.  |
| RQ3: What role does race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and other identities play in influencing perceptions of police? | H3: Because of intersecting identities and historical and contemporary oppression, the role of identity will be a major factor influencing Blacks perception of police. |

### *Instrumentation*

Drawing from previous studies, this project employed the “Exploring the Basis of Citizens Attitudes toward Police” measure (Frank et al., 2005). Respondents were asked two sets of questions: one set to measure general attitudes towards the police and one set to measure specific attitudes towards the police resulting from a recent contact. The respondents were first asked, “In general, how satisfied are you with the police in your area?” A Likert Scale was used to measure overall general attitudes. The full instrument is located in Appendix A.

This survey was followed by a request to explain their stated outlook. These follow up questions are also located in Appendix A. Demographic information was collected on each respondent.

### *Population and Sample*

Drawing from the African-American population in Minden, County Kentucky, this study investigates their perceptions of police.

### *Procedures*

Participants were asked to complete an informed consent form (Appendix B) which was collected. Participants were provided the survey and they were to submit the survey in person or by mail upon completion.

Ethnographic interviews were also conducted (Appendix C). These interviews were used to build an understanding of what the results from the survey may or may not have uncovered. Although a survey would have been easy, being guided by Black feminist epistemology which privileges the lived experiences of marginalized populations, it was important to give the respondents a voice and allow them to interpret their own experiences. The individuals who submitted a survey were not a part of the interview process.

Ethnographic qualitative data was collected through interviews with 24 individuals, two males and two females, from each of the six age groups; 60 and above, 50 to 59, 40 to 49, 30 to 39, 20 to 29 and 19 and below. Only individuals who have lived their entire lives in the area of the study were used for this data section. Interviews were done in a narrative format and averaged an hour in length, with some lasting as long as two to three hours. Interviewees were asked to share their thoughts, personal experiences, and shared wisdom passed down from older family members regarding the police in the area of the study.

### *Limitations*

There are some potential limitations with the data collection. First, the study consisted of only one small rural location which had a small number of African American respondents. It is unknown if the findings in the area of the study have any relevance and/or similarities to sentiments harbored in other rural Kentucky counties and towns because only one area was studied. As mentioned in the Literature review, rural studies of this nature are minimal. Second, due to the limited number of total survey respondents, a variance of plus or minus one in any data category could drastically alter percent totals. Hopefully using a mixed method approach minimized this potential limitation. Third, the principal investigator who conducted the research is a White

police officer. As the principal investigator conducting all of the ethnographic data collection and some of the survey data collection, it is possible that this negatively affected and limited the information provided by the respondents. Initially getting respondents to physically return the surveys was slow, possibly due to fears that the researcher would be able to match the survey to a specific respondent. To negate this, the researcher recruited three well known African American individuals from the local community to assist in the survey distribution and collection. Lastly, a large majority of the respondents were female. For unknown reasons male respondents were less likely to take the time to complete the survey questionnaire which will be examined in the analysis. Again, it is possible that the mixed method approach to the data collection offset any potential shortcoming caused by fewer male quantitative survey data sets.

## CHAPTER 6

### RESULTS

The survey questionnaire yielded 117 completed responses, making a return rate of approximately 33 percent of the target population. The results will be organized based on the initial research questions asked organizing the data around the research questions. Qualitative data will also be incorporated throughout.

***RQ1: What are the overall views of Blacks towards police in the area of the study?***

Survey Question number one generated the data needed for this research question: *“In general, how satisfied are you with the police in your area?”*

The number of respondents who view the police favorably is slightly higher than those who view the police negatively by a slim margin of 51 percent to 49 percent. Interestingly, the number of respondents having a strong unfavorable opinion of the police is more than double the number of respondents who have a strong positive opinion by a margin of 19 percent to 8 percent.

Most of the overall views of the police are situated within vicarious police contacts. Vicarious contacts in small towns can have a huge impact on both positive and/or negative police perceptions of individual officers and their departments. Because of the small non-transient nature of the community, actions of the police are noted and individual officers identified by members of the community. Interviewees in the three age ranges of 20 to 29, 30 to 39, and 40 to 49 were specifically critical of the city police department and several of the officers within it. Two officers were mentioned by all 12 of the respondents in this data set for instances of extreme unprofessionalism and poor verbal communication skills. According to the interviewees these two individuals have been marked throughout the Black community through shared vicarious contacts with them. One 36 year old male shared an experience he had during a traffic stop:

*“I had heard about this cop named Smith from other Black people. That he was a real dick, but I didn’t know who he was. I’d never met him. One day I get pulled over and within a minute I said to myself, ‘this dude’s an asshole.’ I looked at his name tag and it was him, ‘Smith.’ He was rude, talked down to me. I was thinking, ‘don’t they teach these guys how to talk to people in the police academy before they give them a gun and a badge?’ I’ll be honest, I wanted to kick his ass and go to jail. Everybody in the Creek said he was a prick and I thought to myself, ‘now I know. It’s true, he is a prick.’”*

Stories of this type of contact with the same police officers were numerous during the interviews. Interviewees mentioned knowing someone, either family member or a friend, who had shared a negative contact with one or both of the officers. One 21 year old stated, “That guy is a SOB” referring to Smith, even though she had never had a personal contact with him. The mother, who was present during this particular interview, chimed in:

*“Everyone in the Creek knows he’s a jerk. If you are a cop and you treat a Black person bad, or rude, or disrespectfully, the Black community will know. Everyone talks about it.”*

When asked why complaints were not filed with the Mayor’s office and/or the Chief of police, common responses came back to the underlying racism. One female stated: *“Complaints have been made. They (the Mayor and Chief) know and they don’t care.”*

**RQ2: What influences the negative perceptions of police outside the urban context?**

Thematic organization of the data is useful in unpacking the survey responses from participants in this study.

Theme 1: *Police Over Response to Routine Calls in the Black Neighborhood Called, “The Creek”*: A common complaint by respondents was that the police routinely send too many officers to calls that do not warrant such a show of force. One 20 year old respondent stated,

*“Whenever the police come to The Creek they show up all gangbusters, three or four cars at a time, with hands on their guns.”*

Another 46 year old male respondent humorously wrote,

*“There could be two guys arguing in the front yard over a piece of chicken and the whole force will show up, lights and sirens.”*

Police over response to calls in *The Creek* as perceived by the residents very negatively effects their police perceptions. Respondents felt very strongly that over response was due to fear of the black neighborhood and the officer’s unfamiliarity with the people in the community. Also, respondents with positive perceptions of the police never once stated that they thought the police did a good job because, “they always show up in large groups.”

The qualitative data was also useful in further examining police over response. Similar to the survey findings, there is a predominant belief amongst the respondents that the police in the area of the study over criminalize for petty traffic violations and minor criminal offenses, and over respond to routine calls for assistance. There is a perception that the police spend too much time on “stupid stuff” committed by law abiding citizens and too little time spent on “real crime” and “real criminals.” Young interviewees repeatedly mentioned constant harassment at night for simply hanging out on the streets with friends. One frustrated female stated,

*“When the cops stop and ask us what we are doing it makes us feel like criminals for hanging out. We want to say, ‘over there, that house over there. That is where the drug dealers are. Leave us alone.’”*

Many interviewees mentioned being stopped at some point in time for a petty traffic violation. Not speeding or running a red light, but for things like a broken tail light, a cracked windshield, and their license plate not being illuminated. According to the interviewees this fosters negative police perceptions and creates the impression that the police have nothing better to do. One 46 year old female described how every time the police come on a call to The Shore they come in groups of two or three patrol cars, sometimes four. Another interviewee told of a time he was arrested for possession of marijuana because the police found a “roach” in his car. He did not deny wrong doing but stated,

*“Five cop cars from three different departments showed up. All that was missing was the National Guard, for a roach? You’d have thought it was some huge drug bust.”*

The fact that people in the community are frequently arrested on bench warrants for failure to appear in court for petty traffic citations is not lost on the average citizen, especially Blacks. One interviewee shared his opinion of the financial crisis in 2008.

*“A bunch of rich white guys stole millions of dollars, nearly collapsed the economy and banking system, and nothing happens to them. And the police are going to arrest me for not paying a ticket?”*

There is a belief that this type of white privilege applies to certain local individuals as well. One female respondent stated, “If you got money and status in this town you can do anything and it will get swept under the rug.” Another stated, “All Blacks believe this town is in somebody’s pocket.” This type of belief has a delegitimizing effect on the criminal justice system and the institution of policing in the eyes of many Blacks.

Interviewees do not attribute over criminalization by the police to race but rather the relatively crime free nature of the small town in which they aggressively patrol out of boredom. No one felt that the cops were driving around in the Black part of town specifically targeting Blacks for traffic stops. Although some of the survey data indicated some individuals felt they were profiled based on race, none of the qualitative narrative interview data indicated a belief that racial profiling was a problem.

Theme 2: *All the cops do is pull people over for petty traffic violations:* Many respondents indicated the belief that small town cops are bored due to inactivity in the community. Because of this, there is a perception by some that the cops drive around all day pulling citizens over for “silly stuff.” One respondent wrote,

*“You can’t drive 50 feet in this town without the cops pulling you over for something stupid.”*



Racial profiling was rarely mentioned as the reason for the traffic stops. The small town nature of the community and the belief that the police have “nothing better to do” was often the reason most frequently mentioned. Profiling or “driving while black” was indicated as a complaint by some respondents, but very infrequently. One 20 year old respondent wrote, “DWBWAWG” indicating, “Driving while black with a white girl.”

Theme 3: “The cops don’t do anything but sit at Walmart and McDonalds.”

This was a common citizen complaint. Most of the police officers in the area of the study at some point of time during any given shift will patrol through the Walmart and McDonalds parking lots. McDonalds provides free coffee to all law enforcement personnel. The most visible area of police on patrol is the business district, which in the area of the study is extremely small. Citizens frequently see local police in these areas which, in turn, fosters a negative perception of inactivity.

In addition to the categorization of the negative perceptions of police, the survey respondents also indicated generally what they would like to see more or less of regarding local law enforcement: 1) *Increased drug enforcement (“real work”) and decreased, “silly traffic enforcement”,* 2) *Get to know the “Black” people in the area,* 3) *Increased random patrol in “The Creek,” as opposed to response only presence,* and 4) *A Black police officer on the force.*

### ***Impact of Media on Police Perceptions***

An additional focus of the study was situating the origins of perceptions of police, regardless if that view was positive or negative. It was hypothesized that sources of news would be an indicating factor in determining public perceptions of police. The data from that aspect of the study are below.

Survey respondents were asked to check their preferred source of news. The options were CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX. There were also two blank spots provided to specify Newspaper and Other News Sources. Due to the fact that almost all respondents listed multiple sources, survey data is not able to tell what an individual respondents “main” source of news may be. However, scores were tallied based on the

number of times a specific news source was checked or specified. By simply tallying the number of times a certain source was checked or specified, the data is able to indicate the most popular news sources indicated by the Black population in the area of the study.

The most popular news source indicated was the local news channel from the nearest city. Sixty-five percent of the survey respondents indicated this as one of their main news sources. This was followed by CNN with 35 percent (45 out of 117), and a local weekly newspaper publication named after the County of the study with 30 percent (35 out of 117). One 46 year old female respondent was asked, "Why do so many Black people in the area of the study watch this particular news channel?" Her response was, "*Because if you call them, they will come. They will show up in a van with a camera. They will be there.*"

Fifty percent of respondents (58 out of 117) indicated the internet and/or social media as their main news source. Sixty-six percent of this group was under the age of 40. Only four percent indicated Fox News and less than one percent listed MSNBC. A 43 year old male respondent was asked, "Most Black people do not watch Fox News, why do you?" He responded with a laugh, "*Honestly...the anchors are hot.*" One 80 year old male respondent indicated on the survey that all cable news programs were "*propaganda.*"

It is obvious that the possibility of predicting whether or not ones preferred news source will positively or negatively effecting ones perception of the police will require a study of much greater magnitude than what is offered here. However, from the news source data provided in this study one assertion can be made; the chosen source of news by the respondents in this study have no effect on *permanent* police perceptions, either positive or negative. The news may or may not temporarily affect ones perception of the police in either direction based on what is happening in the current news cycle. If a majority of the respondents had indicated news preferences on either extreme end of the ideological spectrum the assertion made above may be

different. As it were, the majority of respondents indicated news sources that do not appear to have an ideological axe to grind.

The third research question identified in the study discusses what the bulk of studies on police perception examine: identity.

**RQ3: What role does race, gender, socioeconomic status, age, and other identities play in influencing perceptions of police?**

Age was a definite indicator of police perceptions with perceptions tending to grow more negative as age decreases. Sixty-six percent of the 60 and up age bracket had a favorable opinion of the police. This group is also predominantly responsible for the overall positive view of police with most answering,

*"I don't have a problem with the police because I am not in trouble."*

This is in stark contrast to the 20 to 29 age bracket where 80 percent of the respondents had an unfavorable view of the police. This age group used open response words such as, *"corrupt," "dishonest," "harassment,"* and *"profiled"* with the most frequency compared to other age brackets. At first glance the 19 and below age bracket may seem like an anomaly in view of the fact that police favorability steadily declines from the 50 to 59 bracket up to the 20 to 29 bracket. However, it is important to note that 14 of the 16 respondents within the 19 and below age group were still in High School and their exposure to police contact in the area of the study was limited. Many of them had no contact with the police except for the presence of a School Resource Officer that works at the local school in the area of the study. This was not "first hand" contact, but rather awareness due to officer presence. This statistic again reinforces the effect of perceptions based on "contact" or "no contact". The age group with the strongest and highest negative perceptions, 20 to 29, are also the age group most frequently targeted by law enforcement while driving and thus conversely more likely to harbor negative police perceptions.

*Education*

Education does not appear to be a definitive predictor of police perceptions in the area of the study. The lowest educational level (did not finish high school), as well

as the two highest (four year degree and advanced degree), all had positive views of the police by 60% or more. Based on this information one cannot state that perceptions will increase or decrease based on educational levels. All three of these brackets together had a very low percent of the total respondent rate at 24 out of 117, or 20 percent. The other two brackets, even though they comprise a large majority of the total respondents (80 percent), also do not provide conclusive evidence. Those with a high school diploma or GED have a higher positive police favorability of 54 percent to 46 percent. Individuals having some college indicated a higher negative police perception response by a margin of 57 percent to 43 percent.

### *Socioeconomic Status*

*Home ownership:* Home ownership versus renting appears to be a definitive indicator of economic class on police perceptions. Sixty-five percent of respondents who indicated owning their home also indicated positive police perceptions in general and just 35 percent of home owners indicated negative police perceptions. Conversely the opposite is true for respondents who rent. 63 percent of respondents who rent indicated negative police perceptions in general and just 37 percent positive.

Home ownership usually indicates higher class status in the form of increased income levels, job stability, and credit worthiness, whereas renting one's residence often indicates decreased levels of these things. This category can also be directly linked to contact due to the fact that they represent a higher degree of social disorganization and instability which, in turn, contributes to factors leading to higher police presence. The police are more frequently called to respond to lower class areas which often include high numbers of rental properties.

Though not directly related to the own/rent data set, respondents in both the quantitative survey responses and the qualitative narrative interviews discussed "class" when responding to questions regarding lack of Blacks in local politics. When respondents were asked to explain their opinion as to why the last two Blacks to hold a seat on the City council were able to get themselves elected despite the huge population gap between whites and blacks in the area of the study (98 percent White

and 2 percent Black) during the narrative interviews all interviewees mentioned the fact that they “had money.” There was also a small degree of animosity within the Black community towards members of the same race perceived to be “higher class.” One responded stated, “*I never liked those two. They always thought they were better than everyone because they had money.*”

*Income:* The results of the Income data sets collected are not a clear indicator of either positive or negative police perceptions. Unlike the Rent/Own data, there is no distinct pattern indicating that low income individuals have less positive police perceptions than that of higher income respondents. Both the highest and the lowest income data sets indicated a majority of positive police perceptions. The second highest income bracket was split with 50 percent favorable and 50 percent unfavorable. The second and third income brackets held a negative perception majority but not enough to be a conclusive indicator of police perceptions. There are several possible explanations for the inconclusiveness of the data. First, income is not an indicator of police perceptions. This is possible and should be considered. Second, several of the initial survey test respondents voiced the opinion that Income should be removed from the survey. The belief was that respondents would not indicate the accurate income level due to the fact that many were on some form of government assistance, or simply would not indicate income truthfully. This was simply the opinions of the test respondents and there is nothing factual to verify the validity of this belief. However, it is possible that this is the case here, and should not be discounted. Third, the highest income bracket on the survey, \$40,000 and up was indicated by 21 percent of the total respondents. The other 79 percent were below this, indicating that the majority of the respondents are in the middle to low income brackets nationally. The study has already shown that perceptions in the area of the study are nearly evenly divided. This in itself would indicate that income is not a definitive predictor of police perceptions.

*Intraracial influence:* A significant finding that emerged that was outside of the original scope of the project was the intraracial impact on police perceptions and interactions. Although much of this intersects with age and generational differences,

the overall impression was that older individuals had more of a favorable opinion of the police than younger generations. Interviews with members of these two groups revealed that, while older Blacks were sometimes critical of the police themselves and also made claims of racism, they were more critical of young behavior and the popular “gangsta” culture portrayed by popular media.

Members of the older generation were highly critical of young Black men and their lack of work ethic. When the question about why more young Black men and women don’t apply for police jobs, one 72 year old female interviewee stated, “They don’t want to work.” This person continued to describe how a well-known 68 year old man in the neighborhood push mows many of the yards for elderly people even though he himself is about to have a heart attack. She described how he offers to pay young people to help him and they just look at him like he is crazy. A 78 year old interviewee, though she was very critical of “White” police and “White” control of the town, was also extremely critical of young kids as well.

*“My parents always taught me to that if you don’t want no trouble with the police then don’t do anything that is going to bring the police to you.”*

As mentioned earlier, this theme was repeated over and over by older interviewees.

One individual stated,

*“Of course you are going to dislike the police if you are breaking the law and get busted, come on. My daddy taught me to stay out of trouble.”*

The same gentleman also shared a story of his own upbringing and what his father

taught him:

*“My daddy would have beaten my ass if he caught me down there. That place was trouble. Every time the police came and arrested someone my dad would say, ‘see what happens when you go where there is trouble.’ My mother would always chime in shaking her head too, ‘MmmmmHmmmm, TROUBLE.’ We went when I was old enough though. Good times. The Creek hasn’t been the same since that business closed. The difference between now and then is back in the day we had fist fights. Occasionally someone would get hit with a bottle or something. I can’t*

*imagine what the Circle would be like today. Nowadays these young kids got guns and will shoot each other over silly stuff. Gangster culture.”*

A 72 year old female, when asked about young Black kids today, blamed much of the negative perceptions of the police harbored by Black youth on the media and popular culture, mainly rap music. She mentioned how the news always had something about young Black men and the police such as the recent Tryavon Martin incident. The female interviewee stated, “The police are not innocent, but if you believe they are racist and looking for anything, why would you give them a chance by putting yourself in a situation where they can abuse their power?” A 68 year old male stated, “Young kids today put themselves in those situations. They are to blame.”

## CHAPTER 7

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

As indicated in the Literature Review, the vast majority of studies of this nature have focused on large urban metropolitan areas where crime, police presence, and minority populations are notably high. The purpose of this study was to gauge the perception of the police harbored by a sparsely populated rural Black community, where crime and police presence is low. Results from the qualitative data indicate that there are some minor differences in African American rural police perceptions as compared to the findings in rural studies of this nature. However, even though small rural communities represent a multitude of social and cultural differences from their urban counterpart, the majority of the quantitative data indicated the factors that contribute to both positive and negative minority police perceptions in rural populations are the same as those in urban settings.

In this study we learned that Black perceptions of the police in general were slightly more positive than negative by a slim margin of 51 percent to 49 percent. It is possible that the black population has a greater percentage of individuals with a more positive view of the police in general as compared to urban areas due to lack of community social disorganization as described by Shaw and McKay (1942), low minority population density and general feelings of community safety indicated by most respondents in the study. One urban study conducted by Apple and O'Brien (1983) indicated two instances where neighborhood conditions contribute to perceptions of the police. One, high population density increased the number of blacks in contact with other blacks allowing more negative vicarious experiences. Two, high density population also increases the likelihood of increased levels of negative police-citizen contact. Another study found that residents, who had an unfavorable view of their neighborhood, also viewed the police more negatively (Jesilow, 1995). Several studies indicated that perceptions of neighborhood disorder and collective security were



stronger indicators of perceptions than race (Cao, 1996, Sampson and Bartusch, 1998, and Weitzer, 2000). These factors are all missing from the area of this study and could explain the slightly higher police favorability findings. Though the difference in the two perceptual variances is small, this data contrasts with many studies conducted in urban areas where the majority of blacks view the police more negatively (Weitzer and Tuch, 1999, Sampson and Bartusch, 1998). Respondents in this study who indicated positive police perceptions felt this way due to feelings of community safety, absence of need for police services due to low crime, and the basic belief that individuals with negative police perceptions are themselves to blame. Respondents with negative police perceptions indicated police over response, harassment through frequent traffic stops of a petty nature, and perceptions of idleness. Harassment and traffic stops due to racial profiling are a common factor in negative perceptions in urban studies (Dowler and Sparks, 2008, Brunson and Miller, 2006). Unique to this rural study was the fact that racism and profiling were not frequently indicated by respondents in this study as a predominant reason for coming in contact with the police. Respondents felt harassment was due to idleness resulting from the low crime nature of the area. Low police activity in rural communities due to lower crime rates is a common theme in other studies and literature sources (Weisheit, Falcone, and Wells, 1999).

Data clearly indicated both the positive and negative effects of citizen-police contact or lack of contact. There is a definite inverse relationship between contact and police perceptions in this study. The higher the number of individual contacts the more negative the perception. The lower the number of respondent contacts with the police, the higher, or more positive the perceptions. A study conducted by Dean (1980) indicated that race was not the sole indicator of perceptions, but the combination of being black and having police contact significantly lowered police perceptions. A majority of the respondents in this study indicated having contact with the police in some form by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent. 70 percent of these respondents indicated negative police perceptions in general. 75 percent of the respondents having no contact with the police indicated positive police perceptions in general. Respondents

with positive contact experiences indicated that the officer was professional, courteous, and polite, and that the officer solved their problem. Respondents with negative contact experiences indicated that the officer had extremely poor verbal communication skills and did not help them with their problem. This finding is supported by research done by Smith (1991) and Worrall (1999) that indicated positive police contact improved perceptions whereas negative contact experiences lessened perceptions. The effect of good or bad officer verbal skills during contact was emphasized by other data in this study. Respondents with a positive view of the police in general, but who indicated a negative contact experience, indicated poor officer verbal skills as the reason. Respondents with a negative view of the police in general, but who indicated a positive police contact experience, indicated professionalism as the reason. These two points are supported by a study conducted by Cox and White (1988) that indicted the demeanor and attitude of the officer, regardless of the outcome (citation or not) dictated the positive or negative attitudes held by respondents. This point is strengthened again in this study by the respondents who held unfavorable views of the police in general, even though they had no personal contact with them, because of how a family member was treated. The importance of officer-citizen contact is also clearly demonstrated in the vicarious experiences shared by interviewees in the qualitative narrative interviews. This data is again confirmed by the finding in the independent variable of gender. 70 percent of Female respondents who indicated contact with the police had negative general perceptions of the police. 75 percent of females who had no contact with the police indicated positive perceptions of the police in general. Males mirrored these findings. 60 percent of males indicating contact had negative general police perceptions and 73 percent indicating no contact had a positive perception. Even though this study did not collect quantitative data on police initiated or citizen initiated contact, many respondents clearly stated, in both the qualitative and quantitative data sets, displeasure with being pulled over for petty traffic violations. Jesilow (1995) found that police initiated contact of this nature frequently produced negative comments than did respondents who had no contact at all.

The independent variables of age and home ownership versus renting were both clear indicators of police perceptions in this study. Data clearly indicates positive perceptions of the police steadily decline as the age decreases up to the 20 to 29 age bracket in this study. An overwhelming majority of other police perception studies support this data (Cao et al., 1996, Correia et al., 1996, Jesilow et al., 1995, Sampson and Bartusch, 1998, and Worrall, 1999). The strong negative perceptions harbored by the 20 to 29 age bracket in this study is supported by Walker (1997), where black students were shown to have strong negative perceptions of the police, and by Brunson and Miller (2005), where urban minority young men were found to be disproportionately targeted by proactive police strategies.

Individuals who indicated renting versus owning a home viewed the police more negatively in this study. 65 percent of home owners had favorable views of the police and 63 percent of renters had negative opinions of the police. There are two plausible explanations for this finding supported by other research. One, factors contributing to social disorganization are more present in areas with high numbers of rental properties. According to Shaw and McKay (1942), residential areas that display characteristics of high levels of economic disparity, high rates of mobility and transient populations, experience a breakdown of informal social control mechanisms. This, in turn, will lead to the second factor, which is increased contact with the police, which itself has been shown to cause negative police perceptions.

The independent variables of gender, income, education, and news source were not found to be clear indicators of either positive or negative police perceptions in this study. Sampson and Bartusch, (1998), Correia (1997), and Worrall, (1999) all had similar findings to the quantitative data in this study that indicated gender has no effect on police perceptions. Qualitative data obtained from female interviewees in this study indicated that police-citizen interaction could greatly improve relationships between the two. A study by Brann and Chaiken (1999) indicated that conducting research on citizen attitudes toward the police at the local level can produce significant amounts of beneficial data and improve relationships. This was clearly evident to the researcher

during the qualitative narrative interviews conducted as part of this study. The female gender theme indicated in this study was the need for officers to get out and get to know the community. Similar findings were revealed in a study done on Chinese and Asian minority groups where both indicated a need for better police understanding of their cultural backgrounds (Song, 1992). The quantitative male gender theme in this study indicated the need to hire a black police officer. This however is not supported by prior studies. Carte (1973) found public support for more active recruitment of black officer candidates, but a study done by Decker and Smith in (1980) revealed that more blacks on the force do not decrease negative perceptions of the police. Income level as a non indicator of police perceptions is supported by Weitzer and Tuch (1999) who found that income has no effect on Blacks' perceptions on quality of policing and feelings of police racism in general. However, what was revealed in the qualitative analysis of this study were the feelings of political alienation shared by many due to the absence of political power. Interviewees indicated that past seats on the city council briefly held by Blacks was directly related to that individual socioeconomic status. A study by Correia (1996) that found that ones education level was not a definitive indicator of police perceptions supports the similar findings of this study.

With regards to source of news, this study takes the position that what is being viewed by the majority of respondents in this study has no effect on police perceptions, but the data is inconclusive at best. A study by Tuch and Weitzer (1997) found that there was a sharp decline in police approval ratings immediately following high profile police incidents of police brutality, but the same authors, as well as Shaw (1998), found that this decline does not appear to have a lasting effect of negative perceptions. The same argument could be made for perceptions of the police held by New York residents immediately following 9-11 and the media's portrayal of police and other first responders as "heroes." Each example temporarily provided a minor increase or decrease in perceptions that did not last.

There were some findings that were unique to this study when compared to other studies of this nature. The survey data and the interviews revealed that the

majority of Blacks in the area of the study do not believe that racial profiling was to blame for frequent traffic harassment. Blame for this was attributed to the low crime nature of the area. Also, respondents in the study do not believe that the “white” police in the area are actively patrolling the “black” areas of town to satisfy a hidden racist agenda, nor do they think that the local police departments (City Police and Sheriff’s Office) have crime policy in effect that targets the black areas of the community. On the other hand, they do believe that race is a factor in the high level of political alienation (lack of black police officers on the force and blacks in government positions) experienced by Blacks in the area. This is not blamed on the police, but rather racism in general at the hands of the majority population. Many respondents also believe race is the reason individual officers are not properly punished for complaints of inappropriate conduct against Blacks. Though some blame for political alienation, as well as lack of discipline against individual officers, is laid at the feet on those in certain positions of power (Chief and Mayor), the majority of the blame is on the general population that will punish those in power for taking action to alleviate these problems in the next election cycle.

Another finding unique to this study is that individual officers in small towns are specifically targeted vicariously for both negative and positive perceptions. In urban studies negative perceptions are attributed to “the police” in general. In rural ones the individual officer is identified by name. Interviews in this study revealed that this type of identification works both ways, good and bad. Individual officers in small rural locations “make or break” their own reputations with both minority and majority populations based on their actions while performing their daily job activities. *Race does not automatically indicate negative police perceptions in small communities as it does in many rural locations.*

Lastly, there appears to be a strong generational rift within the black community between young and old generations. Young Black respondents in this study, as well as other rural studies, are more likely to blame “racism” for police contact. Older respondents, while they do not absolve the police of all wrong doing, are more

likely to blame youth for their troubles with the police. This does not bode well for future perceptions of the police, unless the views of older respondents are something that was acquired with the aging process.

## CHAPTER 8

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of the current study was to extend prior research on African-American's attitudes towards police from a rural context. The results suggest that, in general, generational differences, gender, and socioeconomic factors influence Black's perceptions of the police more than just race alone. This intersecting focus on what influences perceptions of police is an important addition to the literature.

The findings within this study also shed light on the inconsistencies that exist within the literature on race and police perceptions. For instance, there is no clear consensus on the intersection of race and social class. Prior research suggests that when compared to lower-income Blacks, middle-class Black's are less critical of police (Sampson & Bartusch, 1998). Other research suggests that they are more critical of the police. With regard to the intersection of race and social class, this study found no significant differences regarding the influence of race and social class similar to Apple & O'Brien (1983). The differences still existed mostly along the intersection of race, age, and gender. As Graziano et al. (2010) explains, studies will need to account more for neighborhood context in their examination of race and police perceptions. For instance, in cities like Chicago with high segregation, the influence of race and class on perceptions of the police may be masked by middle-class residential segregation patterns. In other cities, where patterns of segregation are low, the influence of race and social class may be more apparent. And even more problematic, in rural areas with high segregation, high socioeconomic inequality, high unemployment, and low variability among income, these factors could possibly influence police perceptions even more.

The findings within this study also support and highlight the importance of vicarious experiences with the police. Only approximately 1 out of 5 Americans have direct contact with the police so these experiences are an important source of information on police conduct and behavior. And as previous research suggests

negative vicarious police experiences are associated with more negative attitudes toward the police (Graziano et al., 2010). Previous research also indicated that younger people are the most critical of police and police interactions. This is mostly due to younger people more frequently falling victim to policing interventions.

This study revealed the overall need to examine Black rural perceptions of the police. It also highlighted a need to truly examine police perceptions from an intersectional approach. Although previous research shows that race is a significant factor in perceptions of police, race does not tell the whole story. Neighborhood context and age played important roles in impacting attitudes towards police. The intersectional approach would be able to account for race as an amplifier of age and neighborhood context. Race plays a huge role in where people live, especially related to segregated neighborhoods. The historical context of where people live in relation to police interactions and patrol patterns is important to examine. Most research has yet to incorporate this as a conceptual framework and variable to be examined. Previous research also unjustly diminishes or discounts variables such as race or class in Black's perceptions of police. As Wilson (1991) suggested, the growing importance of class in the lives of Black's highlights the diminishing significance of race. What research such as this implies is that race is no longer that important. This is a dangerous assumption to apply to research. What would serve these populations more is an understanding that both race and class play huge roles in their outcomes, in addition to other identifying factors.

As with most studies that examine the role of identity in influencing police perceptions of police, more critical research is needed. A broader examination of race, class, and gendered influences are needed. There is also a need to examine neighborhood context with an intersectional examination of both class and race with this discussion. The present study adds the rural neighborhood context to the literature recognizing the importance of intersecting race, age, gender, and neighborhood context.



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## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A:

POLICE PERCEPTION SURVEY



## Police Perception Survey

1. In general, how satisfied are you with the police in your area? Circle one.

Very Satisfied-----Satisfied-----Dissatisfied-----Very Dissatisfied

2. Why do you feel this way? If you need more space please use the back of this page.

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3. Have you ever had contact with a police officer in your area?

\_\_\_ Yes. How long ago? \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_ No (If no, skip questions 4 & 5 and go directly to 6 on page two).

4. How satisfied were you with the police officer during this contact? Circle one.

Very Satisfied-----Satisfied-----Dissatisfied-----Very Dissatisfied

5. What was it about this contact that made you feel this way? Use the back of this page if more space is needed. Please feel free to describe more than one contact with the police if you have experienced this.

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6. What is one thing you would like to see the police do more of in your area?

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7. How many years have you lived in Lawrenceburg/Anderson County? \_\_\_\_\_

8. Were you born here? \_\_\_\_\_ Yes \_\_\_\_\_ No

9. Gender.

Male \_\_\_\_\_

Female \_\_\_\_\_

10. Age \_\_\_\_\_

11. Education. Check one.

\_\_\_\_\_ I did not finish high school

\_\_\_\_\_ High School Diploma or GED

\_\_\_\_\_ Some College (did not finish)

\_\_\_\_\_ Undergraduate College Degree

\_\_\_\_\_ Advanced Degree

12. Do you own or rent your home?

\_\_\_\_\_ Own

\_\_\_\_\_ Rent

13. What is your annual income?

\_\_\_\_\_ \$10,000 or less

\_\_\_\_\_ \$10,001 to \$19,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$20,000 to \$29,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$30,000 to \$39,999

\_\_\_\_\_ \$40,000 and above

14. What is your main source of news?

\_\_\_\_\_ CNN

\_\_\_\_\_ ABC

\_\_\_\_\_ CBS

\_\_\_\_\_ NBC

\_\_\_\_\_ FOX

\_\_\_\_\_ Newspaper, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX B:  
INFORMED CONSENT

## **Assent Form for Participation in a Research Project**

Examining the Role of Race, Gender, and Class in African-American Police Perceptions in Rural Kentucky

### **Why am I being asked to participate?**

We are conducting research about minority perceptions of the police and would like to ask for your help because your views and opinions are an important part of this study.

### **What will I be asked to do?**

If you decide to participate in this project, you will be asked to answer questions regarding your personal opinions and experiences with the local police in the area where you live.

### **Do I have to participate?**

It is up to you to decide if you want to do this. You should not feel pressured to participate, and you have the right to choose not to participate. You will not lose any rights or benefits you would normally have if you choose not to participate. If you agree to participate now and decide later that you want to stop, all you have to do is tell the researchers, and they will allow you to stop. You will still keep the rights and benefits you had before volunteering.

### **What will I get for participating?**

You will not receive any payment or reward for taking part in this study.

### **Who will see the information I give?**

Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write up the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about this combined information. You will not be identified in these written materials. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key.

**Can my taking part in the study end early?**

If you decide to take part in the study, you still have the right to decide at any time that you no longer want to participate. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in the study.

The individuals conducting the study may need to end your participation in the study. They may do this if you are not able to follow the directions they give you, if they find that your being in the study is more risk than benefit to you, or if the agency funding the study decides to stop the study early for a variety of scientific reasons.

**Is there anything else I need to know?**

No, not unless you have a specific question about something not already covered.

**What if I have questions?**

Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact the investigator, Paul Blackhurst, at 502-xxx-xxxx.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you can contact the staff in the Division of Sponsored Programs at Eastern Kentucky University at 859-622-3636. We will give you a copy of this form to take with you.

*I have thoroughly read this document, understand its contents, have been given an opportunity to have my questions answered, and have decided that I would like to participate in this study.*

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Respondents Printed Name

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Respondents Signature

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Date

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Name of Individual Providing Information to Subject

APPENDIX C:  
ETHNOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

## Oral Interview Topics

-Interviewees were first asked to share their personal experiences with the police in the area of the study.

The length and type of response to this question determined the order of the next group of questions. In most instances interviewees mentioned one of the following topics and the interview proceeded in that direction.

-Interviewees were asked to discuss any shared family knowledge and/or vicarious experiences regarding the police in the area of the study. This included any possible historical information pertaining to the police passed from one generation to the next.

-Interviewees were asked to share their feelings of political alienation. Particularly their thoughts on the small number of African Americans to hold politically elected positions, as well as hired positions, in County and City governments historically.

-Interviewees were asked to share their opinions on why they believed there were currently no black police officers on any department in the area of the study. Also, why they believed more young black men and women do not apply for police jobs.

-Interviewees were asked to share their opinions on what they believed to be the most important focus/function of the local police departments. This was similar to the survey question, "What is the one thing you would like to see the police do more of in your area?"