

The Challenges and Rewards of Carrying Out Qualitative Research on the Police in the African American Community

Daniel K. Pryce^{1,*} and Ingrid Phillips Whitaker²

¹*Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Old Dominion University, College of Arts & Letters, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA*

²*Department of Sociology, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, United States*

Abstract: In this paper, we discuss the challenges and rewards of carrying out qualitative research on the police in the African American¹ community. Using data drawn from interviews with seventy-seven African American adults in Durham, NC, we found that community member hostility toward research(ers) and fear of both neighbors and the police lowered African Americans' willingness to be interviewed about their perceptions of and experiences with U.S. police. These findings were observed primarily in public housing and middle-income communities. On a positive note, we found that greater awareness of policing issues increased African Americans' willingness to participate in research about the police. This finding was more common among upper-middle-income African Americans. The implications of our findings for future research and improved policing in the African American community are discussed.

Keywords: African Americans, ethnographic and qualitative research, hostility toward researchers, fear of police, fear of neighbors, greater awareness of policing issues, police–community interactions, Durham, NC.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, we discuss the challenges and rewards of carrying out qualitative research on the police in the African American community. The present study is important because, while prior studies have addressed the challenges of collecting data in the African American population (see Huang and Coker 2010), we have not found any studies that have addressed the challenges and rewards of conducting research on the police in the African American community, a problem partly attributable to the frayed relationship between the police and the African American community (Brunson 2007; Pryce *et al.* 2021). Qualitative researchers have advanced several arguments about the effects of researchers' identities (e.g., ethnicity, race, gender, class, and educational attainment) on the effectiveness of qualitative research in the community (Adamson and Donovan 2002; Brunson and Wade 2019; Joseph *et al.* 2021; Lu and Hodge 2019; Webster 1996). In terms of the notions of objectivity and truth, Adamson and Donovan (2002) have argued that the relationship between the researcher and participants may affect what type of interpretive lens is employed to understand the study. The two scholars believe that the relationship between

the researcher and interviewee can be placed on a continuum—from extreme insider to extreme outsider. By extreme insider, Adamson and Donovan (2002) mean that only researchers with similar backgrounds and life experiences as their research participants are able to objectively interpret the latter's views and experiences on the topic under discussion. Conversely, by extreme outsider, the two scholars believe that only those with dissimilar backgrounds and experiences as their interviewees are able to provide an objective interpretation of the latter's views and experiences. Other researchers have also noted that the insider-outsider positionality is not static; instead, it changes as researchers spend time with research participants (Fletcher 2014). If one imagines that the insider-outsider status is on a continuum, as noted earlier, then the current authors argue that their positionality is closest to that of insider, as they do not belong to either extreme of the insider-outsider dichotomy. This is because they are Black scholars who conducted their study in Black communities.

While the insider-outsider theoretical paradigms hold some level of truth, we argue that, in the present study, our positions as insiders—but not extreme insiders—provided us an edge in terms of our ability to gain greater insight into our research participants' worldviews than if we had been of a different race/ethnicity. In other words, we believe that because both the research team and the participants were all Black, we were able to garner very rich information from our participants (for example, see Joseph *et al.*

*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice, Old Dominion University, College of Arts & Letters, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA; Tel: (757) 683-3801; E-mail: dpryce@odu.edu

¹African American and Black were used interchangeably in the paper.

2021), more so because the topic under discussion—policing in the United States—can be a sensitive one for minorities, especially Blacks. Indeed, the touchiness of and sensitivity surrounding the topic of policing in Black communities meant that we had to have been trusted by the participants to be given the amount of rich and in-depth information that the participants provided to us via semi-structured interviews. This sensitivity may be associated with the amount of stress African Americans have experienced as a result of how they are policed in the United States (McLeod *et al.* 2020). In an examination of several studies, McLeod *et al.* (2020) found significant indicators of psychological distress in African American communities stemming from policing issues. This stress is not only associated with direct experiences with police, but also exposure to media depictions of police brutality (Bor *et al.* 2018).

Our use of semi-structured interviews was ideal for assessing African Americans' views of the police. Research in clinical settings, for example, has shown that employing semi-structured interviews to understand African Americans' and other minorities' health issues increases the reliability and validity of the findings (Aklin and Turner 2006; Widiger 1997). Moreover, ethical challenges in qualitative interviewing abound. Brayda and Boyce (2014:13) have observed:

Interviews lay open thoughts and feelings, and the process may cause the interviewee to reflect on uncomfortable situations in his or her life. The more problematic the experience was for the individual, the harder it may be for the interviewer to get this information.

The topic of policing can be difficult to discuss among African Americans because of the long history of police brutality in the Black community (Pryce & Whitaker, 2022; Rabii 2023), so we believe that certain commonalities between the researcher and the interviewee play a vital role in the former's ability to tap into the deep recesses of the latter's views about the police. Indeed, we argue that being of the same race as the research participants provided us the sort of comprehensive information that we needed to answer questions that addressed the effects of personal and vicarious trauma on African Americans' perceptions of and experiences with the police. The comprehensive information garnered from the participants has also allowed us to understand patterns surrounding citizens' willingness to participate in research about the police, which is the focus of the current paper.

POSITIONALITY AND REFLEXIVITY IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES

As social science researchers, we understand the importance of positionality and reflexivity in conducting research in predominantly African American spaces. And as Black scholars, we share a similar heritage with our participants, hence our "insider" status. We also note that our positionality before, during, and in the aftermath of this particular field research was not lost on us. According to Temple and Young (2004), positionality can affect research results. As researchers, our educational background and socioeconomic status were similar to some of our research participants' and dissimilar to others', as our participants were of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. Still, those in the middle-class and upper middle-class communities in which we conducted our research were hardly different from us. Overall, we may have similar or shared experiences about the police and policing in the United States with our research participants. In fact, both the researchers and participants shared a common race/ethnicity: being Black.

In addressing the issue of reflexivity, we acknowledge that "reality is socially constructed and knowledge is context-based and historically situated" (D'Silva *et al.* 2016:96; also see Mauthner and Doucet 2003). We are aware that the interpretation of our findings matters. We are conscious of our role as purveyors of knowledge, but the transmission of our findings has to be done ethically and constructively. We have also striven to constrain any personal biases we may hold while interpreting our data. As Black scholars, we have experienced marginalization in U.S. society ourselves; as such, we have taken great care to communicate the findings of our research study with respect for and attention to our participants' observations and feelings. We have not pushed any personal agenda and have constructively and respectfully interpreted our findings and given a voice to those who need it the most. While we are aware of our privilege as researchers in academia, our Blackness means that we understand the struggles of the Black community, and have noted the concerns of our participants with utmost clarity and deliberateness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Policing in the African American Community

The preventable deaths of several African Americans at the hands of the police in recent years

have contributed to the weakening of the relationship between African Americans and the police (Brunson 2007). The police and community members are expected to work together in the co-production of communal safety and security, yet African Americans, compared to their White counterparts, trust the police less due to decades of over-policing and under-policing in Black communities in the United States (Brunson and Wade 2019; Burke 2013; Pryce & Chenane, 2021; Rabii 2023). As Warren (2011) has observed, African Americans' vicarious experiences with the police may lead to Black community members' unwillingness to trust the police. This may also be reflected in African Americans' unwillingness to participate in research on the police.

The Role of Slavery in African Americans' Distrust of the Police

We begin the review of the literature by discussing the larger study from which the present study is derived. The amount of trauma experienced by African Americans at the hands of the police had created distrust of the police in African American communities (Brunson 2007). This reasoning is based on the fact that African Americans' viewpoints about the police, and hence their comparatively low levels of trust in police officers and police agencies, may be tied to stories of police brutality passed down from one generation to another (Gaston and Brunson 2020). The evolution of policing in the Northern regions of the United States is well known (Brown 2019). For example, the origins of policing in Boston, Philadelphia, and New York City are well documented, whereas the origins of policing in the South have not received as much attention in the extant literature (Reichel 1988). The 18th and 19th centuries were periods in which policing in the South was carefully structured to keep Blacks in check, oversee slaves, and promote slave labor (Walker 1980). Thus, understanding the effects of personal and vicarious trauma on the African American psyche cannot be divorced from the high levels of mistrust and suspicion that presently characterize the relationship between African Americans and the police.

From Slavery to Post Reconstruction

Post slavery in the South, the end of the Reconstruction Era ushered in a distinctly abusive relationship between law enforcement and African Americans. While the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution ended slavery, the loophole in the amendment that involuntary servitude could be used

for the punishment of a crime opened the floodgates to criminalize, arrest, and punish African Americans (Alexander 2011; Blackmon 2008). The criminalization of African Americans (especially men) was an answer to a population that was now viewed as a threat to the social order in the South (Adamson 1983). The use of the criminal justice system to control African Americans resulted in disproportionate numbers of African Americans under the control of penal institutions (Adamson 1983). The perception of African Americans as a criminal and dangerous element was amplified through the use of newspapers, movies (most notably *The Birth of a Nation*), and folklore concerning the deviant nature of African Americans (Blackmon 2008). This perceived deviancy along with the need for cheap labor to replace the loss of slaves ushered in an era in the South whereby southern states passed laws that were designed to specifically target African Americans for arrest and prosecution (Alexander 2011; Blackmon 2008). These laws, which are sometimes referred to as the Black Codes, created an ample supply of cheap labor in the South. The convict leasing system provided access to cheap labor and incentivized the over-policing of African Americans by various forms of law enforcement.

Jim Crow Era Post Reconstruction

The criminalization and institutionalization of African Americans continued into the 20th century. In the South, since African Americans were no longer considered property, which was valued, the existence of African Americans became even more perilous. In addition to bearing the weight of the criminal justice system, African American communities were now also the victim of massacres at the hands of White mobs (Messer 2021). One of the most infamous of these was the attack on the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. This incident resulted in the loss of African American wealth estimated at 200 million dollars (Messer *et al.* 2018). While some official records placed the death toll for African Americans at 26, the American Red Cross estimated that at least 300 African Americans perished in the massacre (Messer *et al.* 2018). In addition, approximately 1,115 residences were destroyed (Halliburton 1972) and approximately 5,000 African Americans were interned in camps, some against their will (Messer *et al.* 2018). The attacks on Black communities could be sparked by any number of accusations by Whites made against a member of the Black community. These attacks by White mobs often involved the deputization of White citizens to carry out law enforcement roles. These attacks not only

devastated Black communities economically, but also created a sense of distrust and fear of law enforcement.

In addition to White mob attacks, it is during this period that the lynching of African Americans was also prevalent. African Americans were not only lynched at the hands of White mobs, but White law enforcement often condoned lynchings (Moore 1997). The lynchings of African Americans continued well into the modern Civil Rights Movement Era. The use of law enforcement to either perpetrate or condone these acts of violence was well known during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

From Selma, Alabama to Contemporary Times

African Americans' experiences at the hands of the police have generally been unpleasant. On March 7, 1965, a group of 525 African Americans demonstrated in Selma, Alabama and demanded the right to vote (Combs 2013; Pratt 2017). Unrelenting in their demand, the group of marchers traversed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, where more than four dozen officers and several White vigilantes attacked the demonstrators. Known today as *Bloody Sunday*, due to the multiple injuries suffered by the peaceful demonstrators, the events of Selma would lead to another march two weeks later, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prominent African Americans (Combs 2013; Equal Justice Initiative 2018). Marching the forty-nine miles from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, the marchers' demands eventually came to fruition, resulting in the passage of the Voting Rights Act. The annual commemoration of *Bloody Sunday* serves as a constant reminder of the fate that befell African Americans who first tried to push for voting rights (Combs 2013; Pratt 2017). In other words, this inefaceable history of police brutality against African Americans continues to be "passed down" from one generation to the next via the annual remembrance of such an unfortunate event.² Thus, African Americans are regularly reminded of their painful history at the hands of the police by means of: (a) intergenerational narratives of police brutality, and (b) annual remembrances of many painful events of police brutality against African Americans (Equal Justice

Initiative 2018; Pratt 2017). This backdrop of the unpleasant history between the police and the Black community served us the impetus for our research on African Americans' attitudes toward and experiences with the police, of which the present study is a part.

Challenges of Conducting Research in the African American Community

Our review of the extant literature does not reveal any published articles on the challenges and rewards of conducting research on the police in the African American community. Although we were unable to locate any such studies, it is possible we are not the first to carry out such research. Conducting research on the police in the African American community is difficult because of the high level of distrust between both parties (Brunson 2007). George *et al.* (2014:e21), in their systematic review of studies that identified barriers to participation in research in minority communities, concluded that, "[a]mong the studies with African Americans, mistrust was frequently associated with the perception that research will benefit Whites or the research institution and not people of color" (also see Scharff *et al.* 2010). George *et al.* (2014) added that labeling and stereotyping by researchers also contributed to African Americans' reticence to engage with researchers. To increase participation in research by African Americans, scholars recommend providing a financial incentive and demonstrating altruism as a research goal (George *et al.* 2014). There are other notable problems with research participation in the African American community. For example, both personal and vicarious experiences with police (Feagin and Sykes 1994; Pryce 2018a) affect the views of African Americans about the police, leading to African Americans' unwillingness to participate in policing research. Other scholars have observed that personal biases by officers lead to the poor treatment of African Americans, thus lowering African Americans' trust in the police (Nowacki and Spencer 2019). To increase African Americans' participation in scholarly research generally, Tamis-LeMonda *et al.* (2008) recommend the use of multiple research approaches, including surveys, observations, and qualitative studies.

METHOD

The current research study involved the use of participant interviews to understand the challenges and rewards of carrying out qualitative research in the African American community. The interviews were conducted between September 2017 and November 2018. The shortest interview lasted about 10 minutes

²The Selma commemoration is just one remembrance that has garnered national attention over the years. There are countless other communities for which this type of violence at the hands of law enforcement has also been a part of their history. These stories and commemorations may not be a part of national memory, but many of them are also passed down from generation to generation and have influenced the perceptions of succeeding generations.

and the longest about 45 minutes, with interviewees who reported having a direct experience with police (57 of 77) speaking with the research team for about 30 minutes on average, whereas the other 20 interviews lasted 15 minutes or less.³ We interviewed the vast majority of participants in front of their homes, but accepted a small number of invitations to go inside the homes for the interviews, if the interviewees were advanced in age or looked frail. Even when we agreed to enter a residence, there were at least two researchers on hand, for safety reasons. We employed open-ended questions⁴ (and follow-up probes) to gauge how our study participants' prior interactions and experiences with police were tied to their contemporary attitudes toward the police. We also requested participant demographics to increase our ability to unearth nuances in the data.

Research Site

We employed in-depth, semi-structured interviews to gauge African Americans' views of and experiences with police in Durham, NC. All participants were at least 18 years of age (N = 77).

Durham was a good choice for our study because the city has a large African American population.⁵ Durham also provides regional diversity to other locations where studies on the African American population had been carried out previously (Brunson 2007; Brunson and Wade 2019; Feagin 1991). For example, Brunson's (2007) study was carried out in St. Louis, MO; Brunson and Wade's (2019) study was conducted in New York City; and Feagin's (1991) study took place in multiple cities: Boston; Buffalo; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; Detroit; Houston; Dallas; Austin; San Antonio; Marshall, TX; Las Vegas; and Los Angeles.

Research Design

To obtain a broad and diverse range of views, we purposively selected six large communities in the city

for data collection: two upper-middle-income, two middle-income, and two public housing communities. These communities represented varying levels of income, education, and other socioeconomic factors.⁶ Approximately 57% of the interviewees were female, 45% indicated that they were college educated, and the interviewees were between 20 and 90 years of age. The participants had lived in their homes 21.89 years on average (see Table 1 for complete respondent demographic data). Our use of a purposive, criterion sampling methodology allowed us to reach as many African Americans as possible.⁷

Table 1: Detailed Respondent Information

Background Characteristics	Total Sample (N = 77)
<i>Community Type</i>	
Public Housing	22 (28.57%)
Middle-Income	29 (37.66%)
Upper Middle-Income	26 (33.77%)
<i>Age, in years</i>	Mean: 53.83; Range: 20–90
<i>Gender</i>	
Female	44 (57.14%)
Male	33 (42.86%)
<i>Educational Level</i>	
Less than high school	3 (3.90%)
High school diploma/equivalency	19 (24.68%)
Some college	20 (25.97%)
Bachelor's degree	20 (25.97%)
Postgraduate or professional degree	15 (19.48%)
<i>Income</i>	
Less than \$20,000	21 (27.27%)
\$20,000 - \$49,999	27 (35.06%)
\$50,000 - \$99,999	20 (25.97%)
\$100,000 or more	5 (6.49%)
<i>Length of stay at current residence, in years</i>	Mean: 21.89; Range: 1–52

Note: Four participants did not provide income information.

Participants, Sampling Procedure, and Data Collection

We carried out an in-person interview⁸ at each residence with only one individual who was 18 years or

³Seventy-four percent of the sample reported having direct contact with the police. For context, according to data from the 2015 Police-Public Contact Survey, nationally only 20% of Black residents 16 years or older in the United States reported direct contact of any kind (police-initiated, resident-initiated, and traffic accident) with the police in the preceding 12 months (Davis *et al.* 2018).

⁴The full range of research questions covered such issues as trust in the police; procedural justice policing; and whether or not the participants, their parents, and/or their grandparents had ever been stopped on the street or pulled over by the police while driving.

⁵According to the U.S. Census Bureau, African Americans make up 39.7% of the population of the City of Durham, compared to 22.2% for the State of North Carolina, and 13.4% nationwide.

⁶Two public housing communities were selected from the 12 operated by the City of Durham, NC (see <http://www.durhamhousingauthority.org/our-communities/>). According to the 2013–2017 American Community Survey 5-year estimates, our middle-income and upper-middle-income communities had mean household incomes of about \$55,000 and \$92,000, respectively.

⁷Cobbina *et al.* (2008) used a similar approach in their study of at-risk and delinquent African Americans' understanding of neighborhood dangers in disadvantaged urban communities.

⁸The interviews were carried out by the first author and two graduate research assistants who received training prior to the start of data collection and were remunerated for their work. Two of the 77 participants were interviewed over the phone one day after initial face-to-face interactions with them because they could not do face-to-face interviews the same day. All interviews were voice recorded and subsequently transcribed by the first author.

older. The entire research team was Black. Because the researchers and the participants were all of the same racial composition, it is plausible to argue, based on prior research on researcher-participant dynamics, that the participants opened up fully to the researchers while discussing their views of the police (Brunson and Wade 2019; Webster 1996). Using the purposive sampling approach noted earlier, we visited a total of 220 households in the six communities, with 77 individuals (one from each household) agreeing to participate in the study, leading to a response rate of 35%. Participation was voluntary, and each participant was given a \$15 retail store card as an incentive, which may have increased participation in our study (Church 1999; Helgeson *et al.* 2002). The data collection and interviews were carried out in conformity with approved confidentiality rules and informed consent policies.⁹

Data Analysis

We examined the data (transcripts) for themes and patterns. We subsequently coded the data in Excel, then reconciled our findings to ensure unanimity in our coding efforts. We then used thematic content analysis to capture the primary themes in our participants' views about the police (Lofland and Lofland 1995). Using the abovementioned approaches allowed us to "generate concepts, develop explanations, and generate theory" (Stoutland 2001:238). Relying on Braun and Clarke's (2006) argument that themes identified in qualitative research are a result of careful, meticulous analyses, and that themes do not "emerge" on their own, we identified two factors that are detrimental to policing research in the African American community: community member hostility toward research(ers) and fear of both neighbors and the police. On a positive note, we identified a third factor that may lead to African Americans' willingness to participate in research on the police: greater awareness of policing issues.

FINDINGS

Community Member Hostility Toward Research(ers)

Middle-Income Communities A and B

The first stop during data collection to understand African Americans' perceptions of and experiences with

the police was at Community A¹⁰, the first of two middle-income communities.

Not surprisingly, we encountered hostility from some Black community members when attempting to conduct interviews. For example, we had Black residents tell us to our face that they were not interested in talking to us about the police and did not want to be bothered. Our noted response rate of 35% supports our argument that not every Black community member wanted to discuss their views about and experiences with the police.

An important observation made by the research team at Community A and Community B was the proliferation of security systems, exemplified by front-yard signage and security cameras installed under the eaves of many of the houses. Approximately 60 percent of the houses in both Community A and Community B appeared to have security systems in place. It is important to state also that very few White families lived in these two communities, as no more than four White families were encountered when the research team knocked on doors. It is possible, however, that the representation of White families was higher. The question, "Do you think that the police always act within the law?" was particularly annoying to many respondents. We assured them that we understood their frustration, but the question was written in that manner for a reason. (Not only was the question drawn from the extant literature, but it is also a common question in policing research that addresses issues of trust and confidence in the police.)

Fear of Neighbors and the Police

Public Housing Communities C and D

The first author and one of his graduate assistants faced some hostility when they first arrived in Community C¹¹, the first of two public housing communities, to interview the residents. In fact, the research team was completely ignored by several residents even though the research team knocked as hard as they could on many residents' front doors. Even the few residents who came to their front doors to enquire about the researchers' mission seemed enraged as soon as we told them that the team was there to seek community members' views about the police. Almost instinctively, the residents declined to

⁹This research was approved under North Carolina Central University's IRB protocol #1201341

¹⁰This is a pseudonym.

¹¹This is a pseudonym.

speak any further in spite of the researchers' assurances of confidentiality, and also that they neither worked for nor represented the Durham, NC, Police Department.

The residents of Community C who eventually participated in the research study kept looking over their shoulders while answering the questions we asked, as if they were afraid someone would notice or attack them for "snitching." One woman was so distracted by this act of looking over her shoulders, it required a lot of patience from the first author to just get through the interview with her. We inferred from our observations of and interactions with the residents that they were concerned about two things: the fear of neighbors and the fear of police. First, the respondents kept looking over their shoulders perhaps because they feared that their neighbors would misinterpret their interviews with us as "snitching." The second issue was the fear of police. It appeared that the fear of police, based on the interviews that we conducted in this community, stemmed from negative interactions with officers, as noted in the respondents' accounts. For example, a 30-year-old female from Community C observed:

Excuse my French, but, hell, yeah. I would say ... the police get confused with identity, like, if you see someone who looks suspicious walking around, they confuse the person with someone who actually lives here [in the community].

Another participant, a 37-year-old female, made the following observation:

"... we could be out here walking, and they will stop and harass us for no reason. They [the police] do that all the time.

A 68-year-old male, who had lived in the community for five years, observed:

I think the biggest factor is how they treat us. I don't think they treat us well. I don't think they come here to treat us well. You know what I am saying? When they get three or four calls out here, they are going to come and slam them down like they do in the beginning. These young kids out here, you know, everybody knows that their mothers are raising them up. They ain't got a father raising them. They ain't got two parents raising them. There aren't

a lot of things to keep them occupied. They ain't got the leadership, the people, but you gotta have some programs for them. You've got to talk to the kids about crime. If the kids don't have nothing to do, they goin' to be confused about the conditions, and they gonna do whatever, and that's where it all falls apart.

It appears, then, that fear of police in public housing communities may deter some otherwise eager Black community members from participating in research on the police. Indeed, Community C would be a test case for studying the issues of dull compulsion vis-à-vis police legitimacy (Carrabine 2004; Tankebe 2013). Dull compulsion (fatalism) is a situation in which members of the community, especially Blacks, feel compelled to obey the police as a survival mechanism, not because they believe that the police are legitimate, but because they are afraid of the police, feel defenseless, or understand that non-compliance with police commands could prove deadly (Tankebe 2013). This sense of powerlessness, which forces minorities to acquiesce to police authority, could be misinterpreted as high marks of legitimacy, when, in fact, it is nothing more than a survival mechanism deployed by these community members in the course of their terrifying interactions with the police.

Pryce (2016, 2018b), in interviews with U.S.-based West African immigrants, reported that the respondents would obey police officers during traffic stops, not because the officers were necessarily right for stopping them; rather, the officers could find a pretext for searching their vehicles, hence the participants' willingness to comply with police directives. The officers could even go as far as obtaining fraudulent warrants if they were bent on searching the research participants' vehicles. As one 36-year-old female from Community C noted,

There's some good cops, and there's some crooks. Some cops will have your back and some will just snitch. It's all about what they can get. So it depends on the cop you meet.

When the research team arrived at Community D¹², the problems that the team encountered were similar to the problems that it encountered at Community C.

¹²This is a pseudonym.

However, there were other issues as well. On one of the researchers' visits, while interviewing a middle-aged male resident at about 1:30 p.m., the latter told the researchers that, just one day prior to the team's arrival, a group of young people had shot at his house. To buttress his point, the man pointed to several bullet holes in the front wall of his house. The research team became concerned but not terrified. Still, the first author kept thinking, "What exactly was the reason anyone would target this man's house? Was it mistaken identity? Were those simply stray bullets? Did this man offend someone?" This resident further alarmed the researchers when he said that shootings were fairly common in his public housing community. Despite this concerning revelation, the research team decided to stay the course and complete the interview with the male resident, as the researchers needed to show courage in the face of news that could easily enervate anyone. The researchers even returned on a later date to carry out more interviews in the community.

The researchers became aware of other issues at Community D as well. First, many of the residents were quite terrified of the police, especially Black officers. Indeed, this was a common observation in the two public housing communities. For example, some of the residents who spoke with the research team kept looking around as though they were concerned that officers would show up and harass them at any moment. Others seemed to be looking across the street, as if to see if their neighbors were watching them to see why there were strangers at their front doors.

In addition to the general impression the research team got that these residents did not consider Black officers as allies or trustworthy partners in the co-production of safety and security in the community, the research team also discovered that the residents were very frustrated with how officers showed up in their communities at all times to harass them. The "betrayal" that these Black community members felt at the hands of Black officers was demoralizing, as it appeared to contribute to some residents' unwillingness to be interviewed about the police in general. These residents felt powerless in the midst of constant officer "provocations," but also felt that they did not have anyone to intervene on their behalf. A 40-year-old Black male in Community D stated,

Even growing up as a teenager when I first got out here involved with them. Even before driving, I had altercations with the

police just for being somewhere. Like, I grew up in an area where it was still somewhat – in Wayne County – it's still somewhat – and I hate to say it – but racist. And I grew up down there. [It is a predominantly White county]. And then Goldsboro; you're lucky you don't get shot in some cases. And so, you know, I grew up in Freemont, NC, and most of the police officers down there, they were Black, but they were way more ruder than the White officers. Well, you find that. And like I said, I've been around many people in my day and my life, and I've found that the Black officers are way more aggressive than the White officers. And it depends on the area that you're in, that depends on the level of aggression from the officer. Out here you get the Black officer and he come out here and he's ready to lock you up. The White officer – you know they do the good cop, bad cop thing – and they just want to reverse the role, so you see the Black guy as the bad guy and the White guy as the guy that's trying to help you out.

The extant policing literature has pointed to the love-hate relationship that exists between Black officers and Black citizens. It is no surprise that disillusionment with Black officer behavior would be a turnoff for Black community members when approached by policing researchers to gauge their perceptions of and experiences with the police. A notable research study on this Black-Black dynamic was carried out by Brown and Frank (2006), who, using observational data involving hundreds of Cincinnati, OH, residents and the local police, concluded that male and juvenile suspects were more likely to be arrested than were females and adults. The pair of researchers also concluded:

Compared to female suspects, male suspects are significantly more likely to be arrested when the encounter involves a Black officer. Interactions involving Black officers and Black suspects are significantly more likely to result in arrest than when the encounter involves a Black officer and a White suspect. The odds of arrest are 81.7 times greater for Black suspects who encounter Black officers than for White suspects encountering Black officers. (Brown and Frank 2006:119).

Greater Awareness of Policing Issues

Upper-Middle-Income Communities E and F

The research team observed that residents in Community E and Community F were, not surprisingly, very bold in answering questions posed to them about the police. These two communities were full of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and other highly educated individuals who were well-versed in police-community relations, especially the relationship between Blacks and the police. A few of the interviewees discussed their personal encounters with the police, including how they had chosen to go to court to fight traffic tickets (a common officer-initiated contact with motorists) issued to them by officers. A 66-year-old Black female narrated how an officer had issued what she felt was a bogus traffic ticket to her daughter-in-law, so she accompanied her son and daughter-in-law to court to fight the charge. She noted:

Oh, when he went to court, my son said after he came out from the judge, the officer met him in the lobby and he just told him – he apologized ‘cos he said he had really had a bad day [the day he issued the traffic ticket], and that’s what’s happened. And I’m thinking to myself, ‘Well why didn’t you say that when you were in there with the judge? I mean, you did all of that and you knew something was going on with you personally and that had to do with how you were responding [to motorists]. But you were gonna wait until you met outside and say that to my son?’ So, I didn’t care for that too much. I just thought that was kind of bad.

Some upper-middle-income community members also noted that, despite their socioeconomic privileges (e.g., higher incomes and relatively safer neighborhoods), they did not trust the police to treat them fairly. Some of these residents opined that the tension between police officers and community members went beyond race, to include power: an officer’s need to exert power over community members. This strongly held belief by some upper-middle-income community members also meant that they did not shy away from sharing their views about the police.

The research team, based on the totality of its interactions with members from the public housing, middle-income, and upper-middle-income communities,

concluded that upper-middle-income community members were the most likely to agree to be interviewed about the police. A 37-year-old Black female, in discussing the dynamics surrounding race and power involving the police, noted:

Yes, definitely. I think it’s a power dynamic, a power issue. Race is definitely a factor in that, but the power dynamic of being someone who is an authority and kind of taking advantage of the power is something that I definitely have witnessed myself and also see in the incidents that have played out in the media. As far as, you know, again, I think racism is a compound factor in the power dynamic, but I think the real issue is power plays. Well, this is something that generationally has been going on for hundreds of years, you know, where we are in the kind of power dynamic of being forced to be ‘civilized’ by having certain laws, rules, and regulations placed on us as a society. And you know, the early parts of that, as far as the history of this country, come with slavery. And those power plays and those rules, although not all of us are living in huts and on plantations, we are still enslaved to the paradigms of power and control of the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’ Because really, at the end of the day, even if you have a nice house and a nice car, you’re still indebted to the banks and the lenders and the government. Even if you’ve paid your house off, you still have to pay taxes, so, there’s always a kind of overbearing sense of ownership that I think the government imposes upon its people.

Upper-middle-income community members also were more likely to invite the researchers inside their homes to do the interviews, although the researchers only agreed to go inside the participants’ homes if they felt that the individuals granting the interviews were either too old or too frail to stand outside their front doors for an extended period. This experience was in sharp contrast to what took place in the public housing communities, where the distrust of the police may have affected how the residents felt about doing interviews about the police. In effect, the people in public housing who had a strong distrust of the police probably did not trust the researchers enough to share their complete perceptions of and experiences with the police. The

researchers also encountered upper-middle-income community members who had direct ties to law enforcement (they had worked, had relatives, or had friends in law enforcement). As a result, some of these residents were conflicted about their perceptions of the police: on the one hand, they acknowledged that police treated Blacks unfairly; on the other hand, they were unwilling to condemn outright discriminatory practices endured by Blacks at the hands of the police.

OTHER ISSUES AFFECTING RESEARCH IN THE COMMUNITY

Other standard expectations required for carrying out research in the community include disclosing to the participants the attendant risks associated with participating in research, as well as the rules about confidentiality, informed consent, and inducement to participation. These are important steps when doing research in the general population, not just in predominantly Black communities.

Attendant Risks

We explained to the participants that they faced minimal risks by participating in the study. We also assured them that names, addresses, and other identifying information were subject to confidentiality rules, and thus will not be disclosed to the academic community or to the public. As with most research studies, the participants were told to share their views voluntarily, and were also told they could exit the study at any time during the interview process. The privacy, feelings, and dignity of the participants were respected at all times, and no personally identifiable information (e.g., names, home and email addresses, and telephone numbers) was collected from the study participants.

Confidentiality, Informed Consent, and Inducement to Participation

Maintaining participant confidentiality, providing informed consent notices to participants to make them aware of their rights and that they could quit the study at any time, and offering each participant a \$15.00 gift card (incentive) may have helped to increase participation in our research study. We suggest these actions to increase participation in empirical research studies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Conducting research in predominantly Black communities about police and policing is important for

understanding—and addressing—the problems that have plagued the relationship between the police and African Americans for nearly two centuries in the United States. In the current study, we pointed out, based on our experience doing field research, the challenges and rewards of carrying out empirical research studies in the African American community. The present study builds on the extant literature on data gathering in Black communities in the United States. A unique contribution of this study to the literature is that it addresses difficulties in carrying out research about the police among Black community members who occupy different economic strata.

Using qualitative data obtained from 77 African Americans based in Durham, NC, we point out that community member hostility toward research(ers) and fear of both neighbors and the police decreased Blacks' willingness to participate in research studies about their perceptions of and experiences with U.S. police. These findings were primarily tied to public housing and middle-income community members. On a positive note, we found that being more aware of policing issues increased Blacks' willingness to participate in research about the police. This finding was more common among upper-middle-income Blacks. These disparate findings based on socio-economic status make our study even more relevant, as it negates the notion that African Americans are a monolithic group when it comes to their views on salient societal issues.

In line with Adamson and Donovan's (2002) argument about the relationship between the researcher and the researched, we noted that our positions as insiders—that is, our having similar lived experiences and being of the same racial background as our research participants—provided us greater access to the interviewees, which led to our collecting rich and insightful information about the participants' perceptions of and experiences with the police. The sensitivity of our topic—policing in America's Black communities—meant that we had to earn the trust of our research participants, due to the constant distress that Black community members experience at the hands of the police.

The role of slavery as a provenance of African Americans' problems with the police remains a painful reality for the former in the United States. Policing in the American South during the 18th and 19th centuries, in particular, contributed to the veritable abuse of African Americans at the hands of both White

Americans and the institution of policing designed to keep African Americans “in their place.” For example, two Southern states—South Carolina and Virginia—enacted harsh laws to stop slaves from escaping from their White masters. When these laws were no longer effective, White militias were established to prop up slavery in those regions. Even when slavery ended and the Reconstruction Era began, White Americans still found their way around the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to criminalize, arrest, and punish Black Americans. The criminalization of African Americans did not end in the 19th century, as Blacks have continued to be subjected to the excesses of the criminal justice system. Terrorist attacks have been employed by Whites to keep Blacks from advancing economically, and there is no greater example of this abuse than the White mob attack on the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921 that left hundreds dead, thousands homeless, and close to two hundred businesses razed to the ground.

Further complicating African Americans’ distrust of the police was the latter’s willingness to ignore or even condone the lynching of African Americans well into the modern Civils Rights period. Notable incidents during the Civil Rights period include the march by Blacks in Selma, Alabama, that called for Blacks to be accorded the right to vote. This event turned bloody, however, as tens of police officers and White vigilantes attacked the marchers, injuring many of them. Thus, the long history of abuse suffered by Blacks at the hands of the police has led to a complicated relationship between the police and Black citizens. This complicated relationship is one reason why Blacks are generally unwilling to participate in research about the police even in contemporary times.

Based on the results of the current study, African Americans’ hostility to police and policing researchers may border more on self-preservation than anything else. This “defensive” deportment was not surprising to us because of the longstanding distrust of the police in the Black community (McLeod *et al.* 2020). Trauma and past experiences with the police mean that African Americans remain hypervigilant in their communities (Bryant-Davis *et al.* 2017), which affects their willingness to go on the record about the police via field research. As far as many of the Black community members who turned down our requests for interviews were concerned, the research team could not be trusted because the topic was about the police. Even our assurances that we did not work for the Durham,

NC, Police Department were not enough to win their trust.

The idea that speaking with the research team may be construed as “snitching” appeared to be a concern for some of our respondents. This fear also prevented some would-be respondents from participating in our study. Snitching is a particularly detestable behavior in economically disadvantaged Black communities, as “snitches” are considered turncoats who deserve “stitches.” Although the research team members were not police informants, our would-be participants and even our reticent participants had no way of verifying this information. While we do not believe that anyone should receive “stitches” for assisting the police to solve crimes in the community, the notion that “snitching” is considered a “sacrilege” in penurious Black communities is itself tied to fear of police, police brutality, and lack of trust in police. Until such time that the relationship between the police and Black community members improves, fear of police and perceptions of snitching will continue to dampen Black community members’ willingness to participate in policing research.

The fear of neighbors and the police also lowered Black community members’ willingness to engage in research about the police. Not surprisingly, this finding was associated more with participants living in public housing and middle-income communities. This feature of impoverished Blacks’ unwillingness to cooperate with policing researchers may be tied to both under-policing and over-policing in their communities (Burke 2013). These longstanding problems have contributed to despair in Black communities, hence these community members’ unwillingness to engage with topics—police and policing—that they find offensive and dangerous to their collective well-being. The fear of police is predicated on well-known statistics not lost on the average African American: Compared to White Americans, African Americans are more likely to be subjected to illegal stops by police while doing everyday activities such as walking and driving (Epp *et al.* 2014; Gelman *et al.* 2007), are targeted more by the police for drug dealing (Beckett *et al.* 2006), are stereotyped by the police as violent and dangerous (Bobo and Kluegel 1997), and are far more likely to be arrested if the arresting officer was Black rather than White (Brown and Frank 2006).

As noted earlier, a greater awareness of policing issues was an incentive for upper-middle-income Blacks to participate in research about the police. This

was a positive development that, we believe, should help researchers increase response rates when doing ethnographic and qualitative research in predominantly Black communities. Respondents from the two upper-middle-income communities were largely professionals—doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers, and other highly educated individuals—who likely had a better grasp of the role of police in society than their less educated counterparts in public housing and middle-income communities and therefore had more informed opinions about the police. We also surmise that our upper-middle-income respondents would have a better understanding of the law and legal matters pertaining to the police and policing, police accountability, and citizens' rights as enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. Thus, this group was more likely to spot subtle officer bias and abuse, and may be more willing to confront law-breaking behavior by officers. This group's willingness to confront law violations by officers is exemplified by the account of the 66-year-old female whose daughter-in-law was issued, in the words of the former, a bogus traffic ticket. Instead of "acquiescing" to officer abuse of the law, this woman and her daughter-in-law went to court to confront the officer. Not surprisingly, the traffic ticket was dismissed because this highly educated senior citizen and her daughter-in-law knew their rights under the law.

A second reason why upper-middle-income Black residents may want to participate in empirical research studies about the police is their keen awareness that, in spite of their pecuniary advantage over less fortunate Blacks, they could not trust the police to treat them fairly. This group of participants pointed out an important nuance in police-citizen relations—power—that may be at the heart of negative police-citizen interactions. A number of the participants argued that some officers were drunk with power, and would abuse their police powers just to put citizens "in their place," even if such citizens were wealthy African Americans. Thus, this group was willing to participate in research to expose law-violating officers, with hopes of alerting police supervisors to introduce training that would curb officer abuse of citizens.

The current study is not without limitations. First, we employed a purposive sample, and thus cannot generalize, with any degree of confidence, our findings to predominantly African American communities outside of Durham, NC, although our results make a significant contribution to the literature on the challenges and rewards of carrying out empirical, relevant research in Black communities. Second,

because some of the community members we approached for our study declined to participate for fear they might be seen as "snitching," selection bias may have affected the external validity of our findings. Future research should aim to reduce selection bias by employing research approaches that may be convincing to even the most reluctant Black community members.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Our study has important implications for policy and research. First, the current study contributes to the scholarly literature on African Americans' relationship with the police via the lens of policing research. Our study revealed that fear of police and fear of neighbors are important considerations for those who decline to participate in policing research in predominantly African American communities. To decrease the fear of police, we recommend that officers spend more time getting to know these community members, and not show up in these communities only when there is criminal activity or when an arrest has to be effected. Winning the trust of African Americans cannot be divorced from their desire to be treated fairly and respectfully, hence the need for police departments to enact—and enforce—policies that increase trust between officers and Black citizens. Second, it may be tempting to dismiss our public housing participants as angry and cynical, but departments need to address the deep-rooted feelings of injustice that these community members have felt for decades, if there is going to be a chance to mend relations between officers and the African American community. We boldly argue that the pessimism in Black communities about the police is not unsalvageable. With dedicated effort to confront its own past abuses and the willingness to do right by Black communities, police departments can win back the trust of African Americans, even if it takes many years to accomplish. Furthermore, we recommend that other scholars replicate our study in other large Black populations across the country to help develop strong theoretical models that would predict the types of research designs likely to increase participation in research and decrease selection bias.

While incorporating researchers who are perceived as insiders was a valuable method employed in this study, we recognize more could have been done to produce greater participation from the community. In particular, a broader use of the community participatory research model would have increased the willingness of members of the community to answer questions. We

discuss this model below and why any future replication of this study or others like it should incorporate this model.

COMMUNITY-BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH

Community-based participatory research is an alternative to traditional top-down forms of research that have been institutionalized by universities. This form of research entails several basic elements. First and foremost, the method encourages the participation of community members in identifying issues and questions that should be addressed in the research. Second, the method encourages the identification and use of community partners (both liaisons and community organizations) in soliciting the participation of research participants. Lastly, this method places emphasis on empowering community members to obtain resources that can be used to effect change in the community (Minkler 2004).

The methods mentioned above deeply extend the benefits of having an insider connection to the community. When community members are encouraged to participate in helping to identify issues and shape questions that should be asked of participants, there tends to be a greater buy-in from the community. In addition, the utilization of community partners builds greater trust between researchers and research participants. While having researchers who are the same race/ethnicity as the members of the community may enhance trust, having persons who are trusted members of the community help with the research process greatly extends the level of trust. Even when researchers are the same race as community members, the researcher's affiliation with an institution that may not always have the best interest of the community may pose a problem for researchers. Finally, the resource mobilization and change element of community-based participatory research can also enhance the willingness of community members to participate in answering questions. Research that is viewed as eventually providing some benefit to the community and not just the researcher can also increase willingness to participate. However, it is important to note that how the data will be used to develop an action plan should be clearly defined at the beginning of the research process.

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