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African American Perceptions of Police Misconduct and Accountability

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ABSTRACT

This article examines city residents' reported experiences with and perceptions of various forms of police misconduct as well as their perspectives on two types of accountability mechanisms: internal and external to the police department. The data are derived from in-depth interviews with adult African American residents of the city. Our findings highlight the complexities involved in establishing credible citizen-led review boards, particularly in the types of cities such as the one examined here, East St. Louis. Survey research reveals that a majority of the public supports the principle of external oversight, but this general support may be diluted in settings where the public lacks confidence in both the police and in external mechanisms of accountability. The study draws on rich, qualitative data in examining the factors and universes of meaning that influence public attitudes toward police misconduct and accountability.

Introduction

Prominent civil rights groups historically have led the charge for police reform, often demanding citizen review as an effective strategy for raising public awareness of and reducing suspected police misconduct—especially concerning racial discrimination (Hudson, 1968, 1970; Terrill, 1988). Public discourse surrounding efforts to restructure police oversight processes typically involves spirited disagreement about who is best suited to arbitrate claims of police malfeasance. Those favoring internal review by police management typically argue that ordinary citizens lack the requisite knowledge of police procedure necessary for determining whether officers' actions are justified. By contrast, supporters of external review by citizen-led panels counter that argument, stating that internal mechanisms favor police officers and that oversight should be independent of the department.

Internal oversight is not unique to municipal police departments. In fact, many professions rely upon internal mechanisms to investigate and discipline colleagues suspected of wrongdoing, asserting that only individuals from within an organization are capable of scrutinizing its operations. Further, proponents of internal review argue that because police departments are paramilitary in structure and function, self-regulation is critical for maintaining discipline among the rank-and-file (Hudson, 1970). Critics of internal review contend, however, that such systems may be deficient in identifying staff misconduct, and that they also tend to overlook embedded organizational problems that may be responsible for recurrent patterns of misconduct (Sherman, 1978; Walker, 2005).

Irrespective of the preferred method of oversight, internal versus external,¹ public confidence in the police is periodically shaken by controversial incidents as well as recurrent patterns of abuse involving police officers (e.g., brutality, corruption, racial profiling) and the perceived lack of accountability for

their actions. Such incidents undermine public trust in and cooperation with the police (Weitzer, 2002). Police legitimacy is crucial to their crime-fighting mission because officers depend heavily upon assistance from the public in the performance of their duties, and citizens are more willing to comply if they view the police favorably. These points can be extended to public perceptions of accountability—the perceived fairness of the procedures and outcomes of different mechanisms (police department, civilian review, and the courts). Citizen perceptions of fairness and justice are important during face-to-face encounters (Tyler & Huo, 2002) and also in regard to the operations of oversight bodies (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006, pp. 146-149). Yet, fairly little research has been conducted on citizen assessments of justice specifically in the accountability arena—i.e., fairness in both the process and the outcome of cases against police officers (De Angelis, 2009; Kerstetter, 1996; Kerstetter & Rasinski, 1994). This article reports findings on citizens' views regarding police misconduct in their city as well as their assessments of police accountability for such conduct.

Race and police accountability: The literature

African Americans' long tenuous relationship with urban police departments is well documented (e.g., Brunson & Miller, 2006; Brunson & Weitzer, 2009; National Research Council, 2004; Smith, 1986; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). This legacy may have contributed to the popular assumption that Blacks generally distrust the practice of police policing themselves and, instead, favor external oversight. The conventional wisdom that associates people of color with demands for external, civilian review likely stems from pioneering efforts of well known civil rights groups to create external review processes (see Hudson, 1968; Terrill, 1988). Historically, "the civilian review issue has also been a civil rights issue, pitting the African American community against predominantly white police departments" (Walker & Bumphus, 1992, p. 1). One outcome of such struggles was the creation, especially in large cities, of civilian oversight agencies designed to redress citizen complaints. A 2003 survey of 474 law enforcement agencies that employed more than 100 sworn officers found that the percentage of African Americans in the population was positively correlated with the existence of a citizen complaint review board, net of other variables (percent Latino was not a significant predictor) (Wilson & Buckler, 2010). The explanation offered by the researchers is that Blacks are "more inclined to believe that their group interests would be advanced by greater controls on the police" (Wilson & Buckler, 2010, p. 193).

Minority citizens in the U.S. appear to be more likely to lodge complaints about the police than Whites. A study of 731 police departments reported that African Americans accounted for twice as many complaints against the police, compared to their proportion of the population (Pate & Fridell, 1993). At the same time, many citizens who believe that they have grounds for filing an official complaint opt not to do so for several reasons: Because of the time involved in going through the process; because they have no confidence that they will get a fair hearing; or because they fear retaliation from the accused officer (Box & Russell, 1975; Weitzer & Brunson, 2009).

A majority of Americans lack confidence in the capacity of internal departmental accountability mechanisms to effectively control officers. When asked in one poll whether police officers would be too lenient in investigating citizen complaints against other officers, 58% of Hispanics, 62% of Whites, and 70% of Blacks answered affirmatively (Harris, 1992). External mechanisms of oversight are widely regarded as superior. A national survey found that 58% of Whites and 75% of Blacks wanted authorities external to the police to investigate cases of officers accused of brutality against citizens (*New York Times*, 1991).

More recent evidence confirms the existence of popular support for external oversight, at least in principle. For example, creation of an external citizen review of the police department's internal affairs unit's complaint processing in Minneapolis elevated the minority residents' level of satisfaction with the complaint system, which was formerly purely internal to the police department (Kerstetter & Rasinski, 1994). A national survey found that the vast majority of Blacks and Latinos (about 8 out of 10) who live in cities that lack civilian review boards favor creation of such boards in their cities; at the same time, in cities that currently have external review boards, only 57% of Blacks believed that the board helps to reduce police abuse of citizens, compared to 71% of Latinos and 84% of Whites (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006, p. 146). In other words, while the principle of external oversight is endorsed by all three groups, African Americans are more dubious of it in practice. There are several reasons for this skepticism: Civilian review boards often lack sufficient local political support and resources to carry out their duties (Lewis, 2000); the substantiation rates of most boards are typically less than 10% (Walker, 2005, p. 99);² and the image of a board can be tainted by wellpublicized incidents in which a board rules in favor of an accused officer.

Because the attitudinal data reported above reflect national-level opinions, citizens' views may vary to at least some extent from city to city for various reasons. One such factor may be the racial composition of a police department. A few studies examine police-citizen relations in cities whose population and police department have an African American majority (Brunson & Weitzer, 2011; Frank, Brandl, Cullen, & Stichman, 1996; Howell, Perry, & Vile, 2004; Weitzer, 1999, 2000), but these studies did not focus directly on public perceptions of police accountability. Generally, most studies of police accountability in the U.S have focused on large cities, most of which now have some external review mechanism (Walker, 2005, p. 73). What about smaller cities? We know of no published research on public perceptions of police accountability in such places, where police practices may be subject to less scrutiny than in larger cities, especially in the absence of external oversight mechanisms.

The vast majority of research on citizens and police accountability has involved survey research or quantitative analysis of formally lodged complaints (e.g., Hudson, 1968; Kane, 2002; Terrill & McCluskey, 2002; Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). To fully understand how citizens perceive various accountability mechanisms, however, these studies need to be supplemented with qualitative data.

The latter are well-suited for examining the range of factors and universes of meaning that may influence public attitudes toward police accountability (Jones, 1994; Walker, 1997). The purpose of the current study is to examine (1) the reported experiences with and views of various forms of police misconduct in a sample of African Americans in one city and (2) how they view two types of accountability mechanism—internal and external to the police department. The findings can be used to enrich our understanding of citizens' beliefs about the larger issues of procedural justice and police legitimacy.

Methods

Data for our research come from a larger project on residents' experiences with and perceptions of crime and policing in East St. Louis, Illinois (ESL). We conducted in-depth interviews with 44 adult African American residents of the city. Many had lived in the city for decades (mean=41 years) and, for several, their entire lives; it was assumed that they would therefore have extensive experiential knowledge of events in their neighborhoods and in the city. Sampling was purposive: The goal was to interview persons with considerable knowledge about the city. Potential respondents were recruited with the assistance of two research associates who have extensive ties to several neighborhood organizations and community liaisons, consisting of religious, social, and community-based groups in ESL. We asked research team members to identify and approach individuals (18 years of age and older and who were known to live in ESL) for participation in the study. Interviews lasted approximately one hour and took place in private residences and offices.

Study participants ranged in age from 18 to 70 (mean=45) and included 25 women and 19 men; the vast majority were middle-aged, with only 3 under 25 years old. Interviewing took place between the fall of 2007 and the summer of 2008. Respondents were paid \$25 and were assured anonymity (pseudonyms are used here). The age and social class position is indicated for each respondent quoted. Social class position was measured by occupation; in the quotations presented here, respondents are identified as middle class (MC), working class (WC), or lower class (LC); the vast majority (77%) were working class. In addition, in order to gain a fuller understanding of our respondents' socioeconomic backgrounds, we sought information on the areas in which they live. We asked them to provide the names of the two cross-streets closest to their homes and used this information to locate the respondents within one of the city's ten census tracts. Using census data, we categorized each tract socioeconomically: 9% of respondents lived in middle-class areas; 33% lived in working-class areas; and the remaining 58% lived in lower-class areas. Given the generally disadvantaged character of much of this city, some of those who have working-class occupations reside in poorer, predominantly lower-class neighborhoods.

Interviews were semi-structured, with open-ended questions that allowed for considerable probing. Our goal was to collect data that would provide a holistic assessment of respondents' experiences with police misconduct, as well as their perceptions on the effectiveness of accountability mechanisms used

by the police in ESL. Interviews were audio-recorded with the respondent's permission, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim.

In the interviews, respondents were asked: "Have you ever been mistreated by the police?" If the answer was affirmative, the respondent was asked for a detailed account of the most recent contact(s) and the circumstances involved. Study participants were then asked, "Has anyone you know ever been mistreated by the police?" If the answer was affirmative, the respondent was asked for a detailed account of the most recent contact(s) and the circumstances involved. Later in the interview, respondents were asked, "Have you ever felt like you had a reason to file a complaint against an East St. Louis police officer?" If the answer was affirmative, the respondents were asked whether they ultimately decided to lodge an official complaint and why they decided upon their chosen course of action. The next question was, "Do you know that the East St. Louis police department has an Internal Affairs Bureau that reviews and investigates complaints against police officers?" Those answering yes were asked, "Do you think that Internal Affairs does a good job?" and "Do you think it helps control police wrongdoing?" Finally we asked: "Do you think we need a group made up of non-police officers to handle or investigate allegations of police misconduct here in East St. Louis?" and then probed the reasons for their answers. The two interviewers instructed and frequently reminded respondents to use ESL police as their reference point, so respondents' statements would be interpreted as applying to the police in this city.

The full scope of a person's encounters with and beliefs about police accountability are difficult to capture with quantitative methods. Some previous studies have shown that in-depth interviewing is well-suited for understanding people's perceptions, observations, and experiences with police officers. Moreover, as several scholars have argued, citizens' perceptions of police behavior, regardless of their objective basis or legal parameters, are important to understand because they may affect an individual's demeanor when they interact with officers as well as larger community relations with the police. Since efforts to increase police legitimacy are often predicated on the input of community members, speaking with those individuals most likely to have extensive knowledge about the community and the police provides important insights for better understanding police-citizen interactions.

The interview data are limited to our respondents' versions of events, but we also situated their views and reported experiences within the context of local media reporting on the ESL police department. We identified and systematically reviewed all newspaper reports on policing in ESL that were published in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* from 2001 through 2012 and archived in Lexis-Nexis, covering the period prior to and after our interviewing, in order to document particular incidents as well as broader patterns of police misconduct in the city. This content analysis provided essential background information that helped to triangulate the interview data. With regard to the reliability and validity of

the interview data, interviewers asked respondents similar questions at multiple points during the interviews and probed for detailed narratives of events. Each of us read transcripts in their entirety before engaging in the initial coding stage. Then, we independently coded and analyzed the interview transcripts by hand (recording notes in the margins) to identify common themes about police accountability (Strauss, 1987). We then jointly identified recurrent themes in the interview data. Considerable care was taken to ensure that the quoted material in this article typified the most common themes and subthemes in respondents' accounts.

Study setting: East St. Louis

East St. Louis, Illinois, is situated across the state line from St. Louis, Missouri. Historically a largely White, working-class city, today its population is almost entirely African American (98%); 94% of officers in the police department are Black and 6% are White (ESL police official, personal communication, 2009). The nationwide industrial decline decades ago hit ESL especially hard (Theising, 2003). Many residents with the financial means to leave fled, leaving behind those whose socioeconomic deprivation made departure difficult. The city's population is currently less than half what it was at the turn of the 20th century: 27,027 in 2011.

Table 1 reports recent census figures for ESL, St. Louis, and the United States. Compared to St. Louis, ESL has a higher rate of poverty, substantially lower median household income, twice the percent of single-parent/female-headed households, and a lower rate of educational attainment. More than 4 out of 10 ESL residents live below the poverty line, one-quarter have not graduated from high school, and almost one-quarter of households are headed by females with children.

Table 1. Socioeconomic Characteristics: East St. Louis, St. Louis, and the U.S., 2011

	East St. Louis	St. Louis	U.S.
Percent black population	98.0	49.2	13.1
Median household income	\$19,934	\$34,402	\$52,762
Percent of persons below poverty level	42.1	26.0	14.3
Percent female-headed households with children under age 18	23.8	11.3	7.1
Percent unemployed	9.0	13.8	9.3

Percent of adult population without high school completion	25.3	18.1	14.6
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Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American Community Survey 2011.

Because of ESL's small population and racial homogeneity, it differs from most previous studies of police-citizen relations which have focused on large cities with racially diverse populations as well as racially diverse police departments. At the same time, the study site is by no means unique, since there are other small, predominantly African American cities in the nation that rank similarly on socioeconomic disadvantage. A 1999 government report listed ESL as one of 37 jurisdictions in the United States that had an unemployment rate at least double that of the nation as a whole (Dept. Housing and Urban Development, 1999). As a research site, ESL offers potential insights, in regard to policing and police-citizen relations in similar cities, that may not be as evident in large, multi-racial cities with police departments that are fairly diverse in composition.

Crime rates in ESL have been high for a long time. The city's average annual homicide rate from 1985 to 1994 was 116 per 100,000, at least double the rates of large cities (Lattimore, Trudeau, Riley, Leiter, & Edwards, 1997). The homicide rate has remained consistently high in ESL in recent years (Watkins & Decker, 2007). In 2006, for example, it was 102 per 100,000 residents, compared to 37 in nearby St. Louis. ESL also compares unfavorably with most cities on other violent and property crimes. In fact, in 2011 the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* newspaper ranked East St. Louis statistically more dangerous than 97% of American cities (Walker, 2011).

The city's problems extend into the local political arena (see Moore, 2005; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2003). For decades, the city government has been afflicted with power struggles between different political factions. Corruption and mismanagement have tainted all sectors of city government in recent decades (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 2003); in 2005, for example, one of the city's top politicians, along with four others, was convicted of vote fraud—one of many such electoral incidents in the city's history (Moore, 2005).

The police department has struggled as well. Until recently, the department was unable to purchase new cars, radios, and other essential equipment. Funds were sometimes unavailable to pay officers, and gasoline money for patrol cars was scarce (Macko, 1996; Smith, 2006a, 2006b). The department may also be considered understaffed. In 1997, there were 110 sworn police officers in the city, which dropped to 46 in 2012 due to layoffs and retirements (Pistor, 2012b); this translates into a ratio of 1.7 officers per 1,000 residents. By contrast, Chicago had 4.8 and St. Louis 3.9 officers per 1,000 residents (Department of Justice, 2010). And it is not unusual in ESL for only a handful of officers (between 2 and

6) to be patrolling the streets on a particular day, in a city of 27,000 residents (Hollinshed, 2006; Walker, 2011). At times, officers from the Illinois State Police have been called in to help patrol the city and to assist with homicide investigations (Hollinshed, 2006).

The ESL police department has a long history of serious police corruption. In order to set the stage for our discussion of citizens' views of the department, we summarize a selection of these incidents below:

- In 2003, the president of the local police union was fired after being found guilty of seven violations of department protocol, including having sex with a woman after a traffic stop; the woman had an outstanding warrant for her arrest, and the officer allowed her to leave instead of arresting her in return for the sexual tryst (Lamb, 2003).
- The police department's only Internal Affairs officer was arraigned in federal court in 2004 on charges of wire fraud, lying to FBI agents, and taking a bribe (Shaw, 2004). It is noteworthy that the Internal Affairs unit is staffed by a single officer, given the city's population of 27,000.
- A year and a half later, the police chief was convicted of perjury, conspiracy to obstruct justice, and attempted obstruction of justice after he (1) tried to block a federal investigation of a friend who was an auxiliary police officer, who he had been accused of illegally possessing a gun because of his past convictions for illicit business practices and domestic battery (Shaw, 2005a) and (2) bribed a city council member to influence the hiring of the department's Internal Affairs officer (Shaw, 2005b).
- In 2012, another police chief pleaded guilty in federal court to felony theft after a FBI sting caught him stealing video-game players from a bait car. During his previous term as police chief (2007-2009), this individual had less than a stellar record: he hired several officers with criminal records and mishandled homicide investigations. In 1982, his police license had been revoked after being convicted of felony theft and burglary, but his credentials were reinstated after the convictions were expunged in 1989. Remarkably, at the time of the police chief's post-conviction resignation in 2012, the mayor (who had helped him return as police chief) stated that he wanted the former chief to play an "advisory role" in the police department and consult with the new chief after completing his sentence (Pistor, 2012a).

The city's Police and Fire Board has the power to hire, fire, and discipline staff in the police and fire departments. The board is considered fairly ineffectual, however, and the independence of some of its three members has been questionable, e.g., a former police chief and a former fire chief have been appointed as board members. A recent bill in the Illinois State Legislature would establish an independent commission to oversee the police departments in ESL and the nearby towns of Alorton, Brooklyn, and Washington Park. The legislation stipulates that seven members would be appointed by the governor and seven by the mayors of the four towns, in addition to three officials representing the Illinois State Police, the state's attorney's office, and the Southern Illinois Law Enforcement Commission. The board would have the power to establish rules regarding officer ethics, search and

seizure procedures, and other important aspects of police operations. The legislation is in response to ongoing problems of corruption and mismanagement in the four police departments (Pistor, 2012b).

The instances of misconduct just described involved senior officers in the police department, but rank-and-file officers have engaged in misconduct as well. The economic decline and political disarray of ESL makes the city highly conducive to police deviance across the board. Research in other cities shows that patrol officers are more likely to resort to corruption and harsh treatment of citizens in economically disadvantaged contexts (in this case, most of the entire city of ESL), and police misconduct is also more likely in these settings because residents with low social status lack the political capital necessary to pressure the authorities to curb police misconduct (Fagan & Davies, 2000; Kane, 2002; Smith, 1986; Weitzer, 1999). Our review of newspaper reports documented instances in ESL of patrol officers accused of racketeering, perjury, accepting bribes (e.g., sexual favors from prostitutes and other women), beatings, and rape. Such incidents influence the public's confidence in the police department. The remainder of this article examines how a sample of citizens living in ESL view its police force generally, the scope of officer misconduct, and alternative mechanisms of accountability that might help curb misconduct.

Findings

In the newspaper sources we examined over the past decade, the media has frequently chronicled East St. Louis's record of public corruption scandals, including those involving police officials (Moore, 2005; Shaw, 2005a, 2006), and our study participants were accustomed to hearing about such incidents. Local folklore routinely refers to the ESL Police Department as besieged, crippled, plagued, and troubled by corruption. Bearing in mind this background, we begin this section by describing how residents view local politics and the police in the city.

A sizeable number of our respondents expressed to us that they have become somewhat desensitized to corruption in the city, because they are longtime ESL residents who are frequently exposed to reports of local corruption. They cited a number of unsettling instances of alleged police wrongdoing, and we illustrate this with narratives of the three most often mentioned recent events.

The first misconduct incident involved an off-duty ESL detective found asleep behind the wheel of a department vehicle. The officer was also suspected of drunk driving, but the supervisor called to the scene reportedly decided against conducting a thorough investigation, electing instead to surrender him to ESL police officials who reportedly advised that "the matter would be handled internally" (Girresch, 2007; Hollinshed, 2007; Smith, 2007). One respondent, Bettie (working class [hereafter WC], age 63), observed, "We just recently had a policeman that's on leave now for driving drunk in Belleville [in a police car]." Likewise, Quintin (lower class [hereafter LC], age 33) complained about officers who

“drink on the job and get caught while [they] sleep.” Finally, Lorraine (WC, age 56) recounted the following incident:

A [certain detective] got caught sleeping in a car and the policeman in Bellville didn't report it because he was a fellow officer, but ... the officer in Bellville who didn't report it ended up getting in a world of trouble and I think [the East St. Louis] detective also got in a world of trouble. Because he was parked, I believe in the police car, drunk, asleep.

The second type of misconduct involved officers who profited from corruption. One officer, for example, pleaded guilty to two counts of felony wire fraud and a ruse in which he used a prostitute to shake down male customers (Smith, 2005). Thomas (WC, age 49) noted, “[A story] was published in the paper about the police officer who had hookers on the street, he was [pulling over customers'] cars, ripping them off and letting them go.” Other respondents recounted other ways in which officers used criminals to enrich themselves. John (LC, age 49) mentioned reported incidents of officers' appropriations of seized drugs: “You got some cops that will take the drugs from the dealer and [let him go] and sell or use it themselves.” Likewise, Warren (WC, age 37) confided, “People talk among each other about incidents that the police did. Some of them are slick, dealing drugs and stealing from the evidence room.”

The third event involved the arrest and conviction of the police chief for perjury and obstruction of justice, described in the previous section of this article (see Shaw, 2005a, 2006). Jeremiah (WC, age 55) recalled the case involving “that chief of police that [tampered with evidence]. The chief of police ... got sent away to federal prison.” Whitney (WC, age 39) explained, “Before [the current] mayor came in, there was corruption down there at City Hall and at the police station. Even the chief of police was taking bribes.” Finally, Eddie (WC, age 54) remarked, “I've been here all my life and I've seen the changes. Citizens in East St. Louis don't trust the policemen ... Whenever your police chief gets arrested, what does that tell you?” Respondents' reactions to each of these news stories reveal how public knowledge of recurrent incidents of police malfeasance has the potential to unravel citizen confidence in the police. Gail (WC, age 36) believed that reports of corruption have

done a lot to erode citizen trust. There have been multiple problems with liquor licenses and underage drinking; some taverns get shut down and others don't. Unfortunately, we've made national news too many times from the police force and city hall, everything from a prostitution ring being run out of the police department and city hall to federal bribes ... [Officers] have been [involved in] every kind of scam known to man. [And] those things do not help the [public's] perception.

Police misconduct

Citizens' negative personal and indirect experiences with police officers have been shown to adversely impact their overall opinions of the police (Skogan, 2006). Indirect experiences are those related to events that an individual has learned about from other sources (family, friends, neighbors, or the media) that are internalized and thus vicariously experienced. The majority of study participants reported having indirect rather than direct, personal experiences with police mistreatment. Specifically, 45% of respondents reported having been personally mistreated by ESL police officers, 61% reported that someone they knew had been mistreated by officers, and 45% reported both types of experience.

In this section, we discuss respondents' personal or vicarious experiences of police misconduct as well as their overall perceptions of the integrity of officers in the department. Respondents mentioned a wide range of behaviors that constitute police misconduct. We focus our presentation on the types of alleged police wrongdoing mentioned most often: verbal abuse, excessive force, and sexual impropriety.

Verbal abuse

While respondents expressed little confidence in the department's ability to prevent and solve crimes, they took particular exception to the way officers spoke to them. They complained that officers frequently used inflammatory language and engaged in name-calling and racial slurs during routine police-citizen encounters (i.e., traffic stops, calls for service). While this conduct is perhaps the most difficult form of wrongdoing for police administrators to monitor and control, widespread use of dehumanizing language by officers has potentially grave consequences for citizen trust. For instance, Dottie (WC, age 44) reported:

[police officers] go a little overboard with words that they say to people, because all the time, when the police come to your house or pull you over, if you ask them a question, I don't think they should holler at you and tell you to shut up.

And Harold (LC, age 31) said that the police "use the N-word like it's just something beautiful. The N-word and motherfucker ... The [officers] I ran into, they not professional with handling people ... So they'll talk to you crazy." Alexis (LC, age withheld) was seriously bothered by the "rough" tone officers used with her: "They treated me like a criminal, and it hurt me." Finally, Kecia (LC, age 27) offered:

Some [officers] can get a little bit out of hand. They take their position to their head. They be wanting citizens to talk to them with respect, but they can sometimes get downright nasty and say stuff that they probably shouldn't be saying ... They don't want you cursing at them or nothing, but they're quick to cuss at you cause they feel like "I'm the police; I can do this."

While recognizing that not all ESL officers treated citizens with disrespect, the conduct of discourteous officers led our respondents to question the overall professionalism of the department.

Learning about police violence

Several respondents mentioned hearing from family members and friends about their reported experiences with excessive use of force at the hands of ESL officers. For example, Warren (WC, age 37) had “a friend that got jumped on [assaulted by] the police,” and Tonia (LC, age 28) had “cousins that have been hurt [by the police] in East St. Louis: been beaten, black eye, two black eyes.” Similarly, Lydia (WC, age 43) reported that she had been told about officers “slamming [a man] to the ground because they thought he had a gun, but he didn’t have a gun. They slammed him to the ground and made him injure his head.” Thomas (WC, age 49) recounted the following:

I was talking to a guy and he said that [the police] stopped him for mistaken identity and he was trying to tell them that he wasn’t that person. And although they caught him dirty—I think he had been using drugs or something—they brutalized him pretty bad. He had black and blue eyes, and then they locked him up and found out he wasn’t the person they were looking for.

Witnessing police violence

Study participants also reported witnessing officers using excessive force against compliant suspects; respondents’ firsthand observations of unwarranted police violence parallel those of respondents who had heard about allegations of police brutality from others. For example, John (LC, age 49) reported, “this guy was running from the police. He was a crack dealer. And when they caught him, they just laid him on the ground, smacked him upside the head with the gun, put the handcuffs on, and threw him in the paddy wagon.” Javone (WC, age 26) was riding in a car with a friend when they got stopped by an officer, who told them to get out of the car: “As soon as [my friend] got out, they started beating him, saying he was making a false move and saying he was reaching for something. But he was [just] actually getting out.” Kurtis (WC, age 42) stated that when his cousin was arrested the officer handcuffed him and “busted his head [and then] took a bottle of alcohol and poured it on his head ... He screamed and passed out.” Thomas (WC, age 49) saw two officers “beating one guy ... He got out of the car and then he tried to get back in his car and they dragged him out of the car and they started beating him.”

Finally, Dottie (WC, age 44) witnessed an officer physically assault her younger brother while attempting to arrest him:

My baby brother was doing wrong, and the police pulled up and he went running. The police ran behind him and I was running behind him too to see what [the police] was gonna do when they caught him. And when the police officer did catch my brother, he hit him upside the head ... [The officer] was choking him and I said, “Well, you don’t have to choke him. I realize he [was doing]

wrong, but you don't have to choke him. You caught him. All you had to do was just make him lay on the ground and put his hands behind his back, but you didn't have no right to put your hands on him."

Dottie understood that her brother's criminal involvement subjected him to arrest. She was angered, however, because a lieutenant was present and, according to her, should have seen the assault and intervened to stop it. Further, when Dottie continued to protest the rough treatment her brother was receiving, the lieutenant reportedly asked her, "Well, who else saw [the alleged assault] besides you [and your brother]?" Dottie interpreted the lieutenant's question to suggest that if she filed a complaint, it would be her word against the officer's. In fact, many respondents mentioned being worried that Internal Affairs would favor officers over citizens and therefore they typically concluded that lodging a complaint would be a waste of time.

Sexual misconduct

The vast majority of study participants said that it was widely known among ESL residents that certain male officers routinely used their positions to solicit and/or coerce women to engage in sex. Linda (middle class [hereafter MC], age 36) stated:

quite a few of [the policemen] will [solicit sex from] you if you're nice looking and things of that nature. Or they'll let you go and won't give you a ticket if you're attractive. That's their history, the East St. Louis police.

Tonia (LC, age 28) was especially worried that some of the more infamous officers did not consider adolescent women off limits. She observed that officers "will [hit on] somebody that's underage, quick too." Vernon (MC, age 59) said he knew "several [policemen] that have been convicted of improper behavior ... Taking drug money, using sex for payoffs on traffic violations or arrest warrants, and things of this nature." Finally, Eli talked about a friend who is a police officer:

He was accused of having sex with people that he took in and making deals with them if they let him have sex with them—that he'd help them get out [of jail]. And he'd be having sex with them while they were in jail ... And they would tell him that if he helped them get out, they would get him some drugs, 'cause he was using drugs. (eli, WC, age 57)

Eli added that his officer friend had subsequently been fired and might face criminal prosecution. We located several media reports of ESL officers' involvement in sex-related crimes and misconduct. (Lamb, 2003; Smith, 2005).

Police accountability

A substantial proportion of our respondents said that they had been mistreated by an ESL police officer or knew others who had been mistreated, but less than half (40%) of those alleging personal mistreatment at the hands of police reported filing an official complaint. This provides a useful backdrop for understanding their views of accountability and ways of improving oversight. We organized our presentation of findings around two themes in the data regarding citizens' perceptions of the effectiveness of internal versus external oversight. ESL lacks a civilian complaint review board (which is more common in big cities) as well as the ombudsman type of oversight (which exists in some cities) (see Walker, 2005). Citizen complaints regarding ESL officers are handled within the police department by the Internal Affairs Bureau. The only alternative to this internal oversight in ESL would be a civil suit or criminal charges against an officer, including a federal prosecution, or intervention by the Police and Fire Board, which is quite rare.

The majority of respondents who felt they had been mistreated by the police elected not to file an official complaint, mainly because they lacked confidence in the police investigating themselves. For example, Randall (WC, age 58) commented, "I know about the Internal Affairs Bureau. It seems to me that Internal Affairs would be more favorable to the officer than anyone filing the complaint." And Annie (WC, age 64) remarked "I feel that [police officers] are all in it together. This is *East St. Louis* we're talking about. ... [Here] I just do not believe that there would be anything done by Internal Affairs. I think [officers] would get off scot-free." Alton noted:

I feel that Internal Affairs in East St. Louis works more hand in hand with the police department [rather] than trying to solve the problem of the police department ... They're more on the policemen side than they are on the citizen side. (Alton, WC, age 43)

If Alton had a complaint, he would circumvent the police department entirely in an attempt to make sure the complaint was properly handled:

If I was gonna file a complaint [against an officer], I would go to City Hall and I would have my complaint in writing [beforehand]. I would go to City Hall and put it in an envelope, and have the clerk give it to the mayor his self. I would not deal with nobody on the police force, because I feel that all of them work together and your paperwork might get misplaced. So I would put my paper right in the mayor's secretary's hand so it can go straight to the mayor.

Lydia (WC, age 43) also expressed reservations regarding the department's Internal Affairs unit. She commented:

I feel like [non-police officers] would do a better job than the police officers because like I said, there are so many police officers in east St. Louis that know everybody. So therefore, we need

somebody that really don't know them in order to do a better job.

Many of our respondents expressed concerns consistent with critics of internal review; they feared that what they considered an environment of unchecked corruption within the ESL police department would compromise internal investigations. For instance, Deborah believed:

it's always good to have an extra set of minds that doesn't have a prejudice against the situation. I think if you're Internal Affairs and you're a policeman that you can be bought ... You could be [swayed] the other way if maybe you get a promotion, some money, or whatever. (Deborah, WC, age 59)

Lorraine (WC, age 56) remarked, "I'm not sure people that's closely involved with the person who's doing the wrong should be the one investigating because it's too great a possibility that there's going to be kinship going on there." Eddie (WC, age 54) noted, "I just don't [have faith in Internal Affairs] because [of] how they got in their position, its political and they working right with the policemen and the politicians, so [alleged wrongdoers] feel like nothing will happen to them. *Not here* [in East St. Louis]." And Thomas (WC, age 49) noted, "Nine times out of ten, an officer is going to side with an officer. It's hard for you to be in the same profession and turn your buddy in. That's why I say non-police officers would be more objective." Finally, Bridet (WC, age 45) laughed and stated that the police "are just like any group of people, they all stick together. I know it is corruption there in the police department." Vernon (MC, age 59) agreed and suggested that a culture of wrongdoing and lax oversight was deeply embedded within the department:

The last ten or twelve police chiefs have been hired from within and we've had all kind[s] of problems. You can go down that list: corruption, bribery, incompetence; it runs the whole gamut. So these are people that were either not qualified for the position or lacked the [appropriate] training. I'm not sure which; it might have been a case of both.

Consistent with Weitzer and Tuch's (2006) findings regarding black citizens' preference for external review in cities where they do not currently exist, our respondents almost uniformly supported this premise. For instance, when asked his thoughts about citizen review, Randall (WC, age 58) replied, "Do I think that we need a separate review board [comprised of] non-police officers? Yeah. I think the people would be more apt to talk to a non-[police] official board than they would the [police] board." In agreement, Mary (WC, age 53) said,

I think that it would be good to have a citizen on board or somebody electable—that's in the community, that's very active—that sits in on allegations made against police officers, so that it just won't stay in house or it can't be swept up under the rug.

Many respondents expressed a similar lack of confidence in Internal Affairs.

Respondents were also convinced that their chances of success in redressing police wrongdoing hinged greatly on their socio-economic status; the most economically and socially disadvantaged respondents were the most likely to believe that filing complaints against ESL police would be pointless. Tonia (LC, age 28), who claimed to be a victim of frequent harassment by ESL police officers, said that she did not know how to lodge a complaint and thought it safest to keep quiet: “You don’t know who is on whose side and you [learn to] basically just keep your mouth shut and deal with it the best way you can.” Similarly, when asked why he decided not to initiate a complaint against an officer who he claimed had falsely arrested him, John replied:

I always feel like the cops know you’re a poor black man. You don’t have nothing going for yourself. Where are you gonna get money to pay for a lawyer? So, you don’t even worry about going through all that. It ain’t gonna do no good ... [The result of] taking it to the chief depends on what kind of relationship the [accused] officer and the chief have. (John, LC, age 49)

Harold (LC, age 31) described the situation for citizens without political capital. He said he would “go to the City Hall [to file a complaint] but looking at it, they’re all friends down there, so I don’t believe nothing would happen. I would have to go up to Belleville and talk to someone up there.” Tonia’s, John’s, and Harold’s comments represent the views held by our lower-class respondents—that what matters most in ESL is one’s political clout.

On the other hand, some of our less disadvantaged respondents and those who had some connections with influential people believed that this might be an asset when it came to alleged police wrongdoing. For example, Vernon (WC, age 59) recounted an incident:

I was arrested [by an off-duty officer] and I felt it was improper and I [went] down to the police station to file a complaint ... And it just so happened that a friend of mine was down there and he intervened and got the matter dropped.

Another working-class respondent, Gail, (WC, age 36) explained that because of her familial ties to two ESL police chiefs, she was able to bypass Internal Affairs:

I don’t know that [Internal Affairs] is effective at all. Because you’re dealing with a small town, and each time that I’ve gone to the chief—two different chiefs, two different situations—I got a great response and I got results. A lot of residents don’t know or don’t feel like they can go to the chief, or don’t know how to go up the ladder [to] make anyone accountable for their actions.

In one of the incidents Gail referenced, she reportedly decided to seek the chief’s assistance because the person who she had accused of committing a crime was a friend of the detective handling the case. Thus, she sought to trump the alleged suspect’s connections with her own. Earlier in the interview, Gail had expressed concerns about the erosion of citizen trust of police stemming from individuals with

political influence wielding it to receive preferential treatment; therefore, the interviewer asked Gail whether, and if so how, she came to consider her appeals to the chief as proper. She replied:

The only way to resolve [concerns about impropriety] is to follow the law. [My connections] have helped me in instances, but in neither of those instances or any prior to that did I ask for anything illegal to be done, did I ask for anything outside of the law ... In the instance where someone else had a relationship with the detective, what [the detective] did was illegal.

Thus, Gail was insistent that because others attempted to evade justice, hers was a righteous outcome.

These accounts suggest that residents are keenly aware of the advantages associated with having strong political ties and that in ESL such connections *might* pay dividends in increasing the chances of holding officers accountable. However, they did not believe that such connections would automatically or necessarily pay off in this way, given their overall skepticism about the integrity of the ESL police department.

Reforms

Most Americans favor the creation of civilian review boards in cities that currently lack them (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006). When asked for specifics regarding how best to improve police accountability in ESL, our respondents also expressed strong support for external oversight mechanisms, but they were adamant that those sitting on external review boards should not be chosen by or have personal, familial, or political ties to ESL officials. At the same time, respondents were somewhat skeptical that truly independent and impartial citizens could be located to serve on an external review board in such a small, close-knit city. Vernon (MC, age 59) noted:

The problem with East St. Louis [is that] we have a tendency to hire and put friends and associates on these agencies, which minimizes their effectiveness. If you've got citizens that are picked at random, not somebody that has a cousin on the City Council or somebody that works for the school board, I would feel more comfortable.

Eddie (WC, age 54) proposed that "the board should [be made up of] clergymen and educators not in the political arena." Similarly, Lorraine (WC, age 56) offered, "East St. Louis is pretty small, [so] it's going to be hard to *really* do what you need to do if you use somebody in East St. Louis to kind of judge somebody in East St. Louis ... Everybody [is] related ... It's hard because there [are] too many cliques." Gail (WC, age 36) explained:

If a citizens' group is going to be [part of] the same old network, then no, it's not going to be effective. If the chief appointed them, if they're all political allies, then no, it's not gonna make a difference because you're dealing with the same group, just called something else.

These observations represent our respondents' deep reservations regarding the likelihood of establishing a truly independent external review process in ESL.

Conclusion

Our analysis complements prior studies of police misconduct and accountability by examining citizen perceptions of both internal and external oversight mechanisms. A city like East St. Louis, with its longstanding record of corruption among top public officials, highlights the complexity, from the perspective of our respondents, of assembling an external, citizen-led review board that has integrity and commands popular confidence.

Citizens are typically skeptical of any system in which the police are responsible for holding fellow officers accountable for their treatment of civilians. This skepticism has been well-documented in previous studies. What was unexpected in our findings was a similar skepticism regarding *external* oversight of the police in ESL. Respondents' doubts about the prospects for creating a satisfactory system of external accountability were driven by their strong conviction that the local government is rife with corruption and nepotism, making it virtually impossible for any external review board to operate autonomously. The fact that, at times, two of the three members of the Police and Fire Board were former police or fire chiefs lends some credence to our respondents' concerns that a citizens' review board might have similar appointees with questionable independence and impartiality toward the police department. Many respondents feared that citizen-led panels would be composed of operatives of local political factions and therefore would be just as ineffective as Internal Affairs is perceived to be. While they fully endorsed the *principle* of external citizen review of complaints against the police, our subjects were quite dubious that such a system would work successfully *in practice* in a setting like East St. Louis. For this reason, it is possible that in this city creation of an external board would not lead to a net increase in the number of citizen complaints against officers. And such a lack of confidence in police accountability mechanisms in ESL is consistent with prior research (Weitzer & Tuch, 2006) that documents dissatisfaction with the performance of existing civilian review boards among a sizeable minority (43%) of African Americans in the U.S.

If ESL residents are dubious about police accountability, they also appear somewhat desensitized to some forms of police wrongdoing as well. In our interviews, several respondents provided detailed accounts of police misconduct that were often regarded as a fact of life in this city. Almost half of our respondents reported that they had personally been mistreated by a police officer in ESL, but just 40% of the latter lodged an official complaint. Therefore, our findings seemingly reveal an interaction between respondents' personal experiences, their awareness of the legacy of police misconduct in the city, and perceptions that internal mechanisms of accountability operated poorly. It appears that many ESL residents have come to expect a certain level of police malfeasance and have thus normalized such behavior. Moreover, being aware of incidents in which patrol officers or senior officers *had* been held

accountable—convicted of crimes and fired—does not necessarily change a person’s diffuse perception of rampant misconduct within the ESL police department. Respondents did not interpret this as effective oversight. Instead, instances of misconduct that were punished only served to reinforce their general view that the department was a rotten one, not that rogue officers would be caught and penalized by city authorities. For ESL residents, successful cases of accountability did not mean that the system is working but instead that such cases were just the tip of the iceberg and that the majority of violators would go undetected. It is noteworthy that many of the most serious misconduct incidents were investigated and prosecuted by *federal* authorities, not by city officials. The implication is that police accountability requires outside intervention, only reaffirming the view that local oversight is and will remain an oxymoron.

Although the findings presented in this article are drawn from respondents in a city that differs in certain respects from many other settings where issues of police misconduct and accountability have been studied, the results may be salient elsewhere, particularly for cities similar to East St. Louis. Unfortunately, little research has been done on public perceptions of extant forms of police accountability, internal or external to a police department, so we have little evidence from other settings from which to draw comparisons to the present findings. Much more research is needed, in various contexts, on the ways in which citizens assess accountability mechanisms and on their ideas for reforming existing systems.

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Footnotes

1. This classification does not fully reflect important variation among contemporary police oversight processes (see Walker & Kreisel [1996] and Walker [2005] for a broader discussion). One such mechanism, used by several American police departments, is the internal "early warning system," a computer-assisted method for identifying officers who generate an unusual amount of citizen complaints or use-of-force actions, thus enabling supervisors to take remedial action (Walker, Alpert, & Kenney, 2000). This mechanism has been shown to pay dividends in curbing officer misconduct when it is used properly (Alpert & Walker 2000). [↵](#)
2. The substantiation rates for internal, department boards are typically higher than those of civilian review boards. A study of 77 internal affairs units in Washington State reported a complaint-

substantiation rate average of 25% (Dugan & Breda, 1991), and other evidence indicates that almost everywhere “the internal system has been more prone to find police misconduct” (Perez & Muir, 1996, p. 218). The public, however, assumes that such internal boards sustain very few charges against officers. [↵](#)