



## The urban world is a world of police

The urban world is a world of police. From city to city, regardless of country, whether controlled by localities or national governments, whether detached from the military or a unit of it, the police are present. While their ability to prevent, deter, or solve crime varies, the police are expected to maintain public order and preserve “the peace.” As uniformed agents of the state (and other sectors of collective action), the police possess discretionary powers of detention and arrest (Brown, 1981). Unlike any other urban/local institution, the police are “a mechanism for the distribution of non-negotiably coercive force” at the local level (Bittner, 1970, p. 46).

Bias, however, shapes how the police distribute their “coercive force” in cities and other urban spaces. Bias by the police influences how racial, ethnic, and other groups (e.g., laborers and sexual minorities) feel the force and perceive the authority and legitimacy behind it (Bittner, 1970; Hall et al., 1978; Harring, 1983). Consequently, the police influence how urban denizens experience the city. The police influence how race and ethnicity, and other social markers that determine health, opportunities, and wealth (e.g., class and neighborhood), operate in cities. Meanwhile, the police generally remain absent from the pages of key academic journals about cities. The global urban disturbances against the police in 2020, however, make it plain the police deserve more scrutiny as urban institutions.

### Bias and the police in urban places

“[A]lthough police emerge from different histories in different places and serve different power relations, there are certain shared realities about police no matter where you are” (Correia & Wall, 2020, p. 5). Bias as differential treatment is one of them. Historically, bias affects the “ecological distribution of police work” (Bittner, 1970, p. 9); it still does. The police are biased against some groups and spaces and not others. Consequently, some races and places, some ethnicities and quarters, receive much more involuntary surveillance, intervention, and harm by the police than others. It’s been so since the first uniformed police departments were established in Western European and North American cities in the mid-to late 19th century (e.g., Harring, 1983; Monkkinen, 2004). It’s true, too, of pre-police institutions such as the night watch, slave patrols, and territorial and colonial marshals (Vitale, 2017). In short, bias is a fundamental police function.

Perhaps the bias of the police was more palpable in the urban past. Then it was not assumed initially that the police would enforce laws in the broad sense, but that they would concentrate on the control of individual and collective tendencies towards transgression and disorder issuing from what were referred to as “the dangerous classes.” (Bittner, 1970, p. 10)

Nevertheless, the bias of the police against some urban groups endures today, even if empirically proving it produces or contributes to disparities in policing and outcomes (e.g., shootings of civilians) is methodologically difficult (Knox et al., 2020).

## Protesting the police in the urban United States

As long as there have been police in cities there have been calls to curb the bias of the police. Racial and ethnic groups and communities, and other groups, negatively and disproportionately burdened by the police via surveillance and stops, citations and fines, arrests and jailing, and violence and death condemn what the police do and to whom. Condemnations of the police perhaps have never been more loud, diverse, and global than those associated with the 2020 demonstrations against police violence in the United States.

The suffocation of George Floyd by Minneapolis police, the no-knock killing of Breonna Taylor by Louisville police, and decades of similar deaths of Black denizens of cities and suburbs from police violence (e.g., Atatiana Jefferson, Yvette Smith, Eric Garner, and Philando Castile), coupled with deaths by white vigilantism defended as policing via “citizen arrest” or “stand your ground” (e.g., Ahmaud Arbery or Trayvon Martin), fueled the 2020 mass movement to the streets against police violence and its racial disparities in deaths in the urban United States. The demonstrations were against police violence, both formal and informal, and included demonstrations against what Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1900) famously described at the turn of the last century as the “unwritten lynch law [that] justifies . . . putting human beings to death without complaint under oath, without trial by jury, without opportunity to make defense, and without right to appeal.”

Demonstrations occurred in at least 1,000 central cities and their suburban satellites in the U.S. At many protests against police brutality, police appeared and behaved as if countering insurgents or “enemy combatants” abroad instead of fellow citizens with righteous grievances about policing at home. Armor-clad police, among other actions, used heavy metal vehicles to menace and self-protect, truncheons and shields to strike, chemical sprays to tear, “beanbag” rounds and flashbang grenades to disperse crowds, execute curfews, and rout rioters. A plurality (45%) of Americans, according to a June 2020 *Washington Post-Schar Poll*, judged the use of force by police against the protestors in cities as “too much.”

But the scale and severity of force by armored police in U.S. cities and suburbs during the demonstrations wasn’t an aberration, if one takes a longer look. Police departments in the U.S., generally, deploy more officers to protests when the protests are against the police (Reynolds-Stenson, 2018). Moreover, since the demonstrations and “disturbances” of the 1960s, police at protests against them—especially Black-led demonstrations—tend to use more force than when they face demonstrations with other agendas (Davenport et al., 2011). That partly explains why police in the U.S. ignored the armed demonstrations against local and state public health orders during the pandemic. Still, the ferocity of the police at some demonstrations jarred the U.S. public. It hadn’t witnessed such scenes of “police riot” against civilians since the 1999 “Battle in Seattle” between police and anti-WTO demonstrators and the police violence against anti-IMF protestors in Washington, D.C., in 2000.

## Protesting the police in urban elsewhere

Protestors in metropolises of the Global North and South demonstrated in solidarity against police violence in the urban U.S. From Berlin to Bogota, Copenhagen to Cape Town, Lisbon to Lagos, São Paulo to Sydney, Tokyo to Tunis, demonstrations expressed indignation over

police killings of Black denizens in the United States. They declared “BLACK LIVES MATTER,” suggesting universal support for the claim and aspiration. In those moments, there was a universal solidarity against anti-Black racism. Yet, many outside the United States who stood and knelt in global solidarity against anti-Black racism resided in cities and suburbs where anti-blackness is culturally entrenched. Nevertheless, protestors outside the United States who called for ending police violence in the U.S. said the names of Black Americans police killed.

At the same time, protests in cities and suburbs outside the U.S. condemned police violence against Black denizens of their countries. In Brazil, for example, protest placards on the streets of Rio de Janeiro included photos of João Pedro Matos Pinto. Police wrongly killed the 14-year old during a pacification campaign against drug gangs in the favelas of São Gonçalo, a satellite city of Rio. His death was one more among the thousands of Black Brazilians police kill, using “gratuitous, insane, excessive and asymmetric” violence (Phillips, 2020). So great is contemporary Brazilian police violence against Black denizens that it surpasses in scale and scope what Black Americans annually face (Smith, 2016).

Meanwhile in France, anti-police protests in Paris, Lille, Lyon, and Marseille drew attention to Adama Traoré. Mr. Traore was 24 years old when he died in a police transport after three National Gendarmerie officers pinned him on the ground in the Parisian suburb of Beaumont-sur-Oise. His death eerily paralleled the death of George Floyd. It renewed attention to the policing of the nation’s race-class *banlieues* and *cités* (Fassin, 2013). It recalled police violence sparking contentious behavior by Black African and Maghreb youth and adults (Schneider, 2014), long before the police crackdowns against the riotous *mouvement des gilets jaunes* (i.e., the Yellow Vest Movement) in 2018.

Those and other examples of protests against police violence from the urban Global South and the urban Global North, messaged the world that the bias of the police against Black denizens, be they citizens or migrants, is a common phenomenon. While empirically challenging to quantify, qualitative narratives from Montevideo to Moscow reveal the bias of the police against Blacks in cities and suburbs (e.g., Gerber & Mendelson, 2008; Gonzalez, 2017). But the negative bias of the police in urban and peri-urban spaces elsewhere targets an assortment of other groups.

Many convincing narratives of police violence against other racialized groups are shared in the urban places of Australia, Canada, and New Zealand (e.g., Alberton et al., 2019; Cunneen, 2017). Their demonstrations against police violence and its disparities in deaths amplify the declarations “NATIVE LIVES MATTER” or “ABORIGINAL LIVES MATTER.” Police violence, and lesser forms of police abuse, oppression, and repression, against ethnic minorities, along with religious minorities, is happening in other urban and peri-urban spaces. It includes bias by the police against groups such as the Roma in European cities (Hera, 2017), Uighurs in Xinjiang (Zenz & Leibold, 2020), and Dalits of New Delhi and other Indian cities and suburbs (Parthasarathi, 2011).

And the bias of the police is a problem in urban spaces even when the bias isn’t against racial or ethnic groups per se. In cities and suburbs of many majority-Black nations, for instance, the negative bias of the police, including police violence, mainly burdens and harms poor Black denizens of African and Caribbean cities such as Accra, Durban, Kingston, and Port-au-Prince (e.g., Harriott, 2000; Marks & Wood, 2010; Paller, 2019).

## Looking forward

The choices the police make, and on the behalf of certain groups rather than others, shape and contribute to the development of cities, as well as influence how cities allocate some benefits and burdens among their denizens, particularly by race and ethnicity. Across the disciplines—from anthropology to sociology—and within multidisciplinary areas such as criminology, Black studies, and public health, scholars are examining how the police matter, especially to urban dwellers. Meanwhile, urbanists generally are behind the curve, theoretically and empirically, when it comes to the police and cities.

Perhaps the global demonstrations of 2020 against the police in the urban United States and the urban elsewhere will compel more urbanists to interrogate how the police shape cities and for whose benefit and burden. Maybe more of us will examine how the police buttress racial and ethnic inequalities, and additional social inequities, created by other urban institutions, including those of markets and civil society. Potentially, the contemporary moment of urban social movements against police violence around the world may move more urbanists to help explain why the urban world indeed is a world of police.

Michael Leo Owens  
Emory University

 [michael.leo.owens@emory.edu](mailto:michael.leo.owens@emory.edu)  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8539-7056>

## About the author

*Michael Leo Owens* is Associate Professor of Political Science and Co-Director of the Politics of Policing Lab at Emory University. A scholar of urban politics, his current projects include studies of policing in U.S. cities, particularly the civic consequences of police militarization and police violence. He is also completing a book on community organizing in the U.S. for the restoration of political, social, and civic rights to formerly imprisoned people. Owens's publications include *God and Government in the Ghetto: The Politics of Church-State Collaboration in Black America* and articles in journals such as the *Journal of Politics*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *Urban Affairs Review*. A former chair of the governing board of the Urban Affairs Association and former member of the board of directors of Prison Policy Initiative, Owens currently serves on the editorial boards of the *Journal of Race, Ethnicity and the City*; *Journal of Urban Affairs*; *Perspectives on Politics*; and *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. He also volunteers with the Youth Diversion Program of the DeKalb County (Georgia) Juvenile Court.

## References

- Alberton, A. M., Gorey, K. M., Angell, G. B., & McCue, H. A. (2019). Intersection of Indigenous peoples and police: Questions about contact and confidence. *Canadian Journal of Criminology and Criminal Justice*, 61(4), 101–119. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cjccj.2018-0064>
- Bittner, E. (1970). *The functions of the police in modern society: A review of background factors, current practices, and possible role models*. National Institute of Mental Health, Center for Studies of Crime and Delinquency.
- Brown, M. K. (1981). *Working the street: Police discretion and the dilemmas of reform*. Russell Sage Foundation.

- Correia, D., & Wall, T. W. (2020). *Police: A field guide*. Verso.
- Cunneen, C. (2017). Police violence: The case of Indigenous Australians. In P. Sturme (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of violence and aggression* (pp. 1–12). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Davenport, C., Soule, S. A., & Armstrong, D. A. (2011). Protesting while black? The differential policing of American activism, 1960 to 1990. *American Sociological Review*, 76(1), 152–178. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122410395370>
- Fassin, D. (2013). *Enforcing order: An ethnography of urban policing*. Polity.
- Gerber, T. P., & Mendelson, S. E. (2008). Public experiences of police violence and corruption in contemporary Russia: A case of predatory policing? *Law & Society Review*, 42(1), 1–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5893.2008.00333.x>
- Gonzalez, Y. (2017). ‘What citizens can see of the state’: Police and the construction of democratic citizenship in Latin America. *Theoretical Criminology*, 21(4), 494–511. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480617724826>
- Hall, S., Critcher, C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. (1978). *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state and law and order*. Palgrave.
- Harring, S. L. (1983). *Policing a class society: The experience of American cities, 1865-1915*. Rutgers University Press.
- Harriott, A. (2000). *Police and crime control in Jamaica: Problems of reforming ex-colonial constabularies*. University of West Indies Press.
- Hera, G. (2017). The relationship between the Roma and the police: A Roma perspective. *Policing and Society*, 27(4), 393–407. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2015.1067204>
- Knox, D., Lowe, W., & Mummolo, J. (2020). The bias is built in: How administrative records mask racially biased policing. *American Political Science Review*, 114(3), 619–637. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055420000039>
- Marks, M., & Wood, J. (2010). South African policing at a crossroads: The case for a ‘minimal’ and ‘minimalist’ public police. *Theoretical Criminology*, 14(3), 311–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480610369785>
- Monkkonen, E. H. (2004). *Police in urban America, 1860-1920*. Cambridge University Press.
- Paller, J. W. (2019). *Democracy in Ghana: Everyday politics in urban Africa*. Cambridge University Press.
- Parthasarathi, M. (2011). Paramakudi violence: Against Dalits, against politics. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 46(44/45), 14–17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23047380>
- Phillips, T. (2020, June 3). Black lives shattered: Outrage as boy, 14, is Brazil police’s latest victim. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/03/brazil-black-lives-police-teenager>.
- Reynolds-Stenson, H. (2018). Protesting the police: Anti-police brutality claims as a predictor of police repression of protest. *Social Movement Studies*, 17(1), 48–63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1381592>
- Schneider, C. L. (2014). *Police power and race riots: Urban unrest in Paris and New York*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Smith, C. A. (2016). *Afro-paradise: Blackness, violence, and performance in Brazil*. University of Illinois Press.
- Vitale, A. S. (2017). *The end of policing*. Verso Books.
- Wells-Barnett, I. B. (1900). Lynch law in America. *The Arena*, 23(1), 15–24. <https://etc.usf.edu/lit2go/185/civil-rights-and-conflict-in-the-united-states-selected-speeches/4375/speech-on-lynch-law-in-america-given-by-ida-b-wells-in-chicago-illinois-january-1900/>
- Zenz, A., & Leibold, J. (2020). Securitizing Xinjiang: Police recruitment, informal policing and ethnic minority co-optation. *The China Quarterly*, 242(June), 324–348.