



De-policing and crime in the wake of Ferguson: Racialized changes in the quantity and quality of policing among Missouri police departments[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: This study explored whether police departments have engaged in “de-policing”—withdrawal from active police work—in response to unprecedented levels of negative attention, as well as the correlates of changes in police behavior.

Methods: Using data from 118 of the 121 police departments serving jurisdictions over 5000 residents in Missouri, we examined changes in both the quantity (rates of vehicle/traffic stops, searches, and arrests) and quality (“hit rates” from searches) of policing from 2014 to 2015 and whether de-policing corresponded with year-over-year changes in crime rates.

Results: The findings revealed a -0.11 standardized change in stops (around 67,000 fewer stops in 2015 than 2014) and a 0.17 standardized change in hit rates (nearly 2 percentage points). Multivariate models indicated that departments serving larger African-American populations conducted fewer stops ($\beta = -0.44$), searches ($\beta = -0.37$), and arrests ($\beta = -0.27$) in 2015 compared to 2014, although race was unrelated to changes in hit rates. Changes in police behavior had no appreciable effect on total, violent, or property crime rates.

Conclusions: The negative attention and increased scrutiny of law enforcement appears to have had an impact on traffic stops and hit rates in Missouri. Given the racialized findings, training and community-outreach programs should aim to increase mutual trust among the police and African-American communities. Also, increasing organizational justice within departments might be one way to improve officer morale and increase motivation in the current policing climate.

1. Introduction

American police have been subjected to an unprecedented amount of public and governmental scrutiny in recent years. The shooting death of Michael Brown in August 2014 in Ferguson, MO sparked civil unrest, a social media outburst, and galvanized the Black Lives Matter movement. This series of events led to widespread speculation that officers are *de-policing*—retreating from active police work in reaction to the negative publicity that has been placed on police agencies across the country. Anecdotally, politicians, journalists, scholars, law enforcement executives, and the current President have either hinted at or explicitly discussed how recent events including Ferguson may have led to de-policing in departments across America. Notably, during a speech delivered to the University of Chicago Law School on October 15th

2015, FBI Director Comey stated:

“I don't know whether this explains it entirely, but I do have a strong sense that some part of the explanation is a chill wind blowing through American law enforcement over the last year. And that wind is surely changing behavior.” (Schmidt and Apuzzo, 2015)

In short, the de-policing argument suggests that officers are withdrawing from proactive styles of law enforcement as a way to avoid getting caught up in a controversial use-of-force incident.

It also has been suggested that the recent increase in violent crime in the United States stems from such de-policing behavior (Mac Donald, 2016) as law enforcement shirks from proactive strategies known to impact crime (Braga, 2005; Braga and Weisburd, 2012; Weisburd et al., 2010). Collectively, the connection between public scrutiny, de-poli-

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cing, and crime has become known as the “Ferguson Effect.” The evidence indicates that crime rose in 2015 compared to 2014 for certain specific offenses, including violence (see [Mac Donald, 2015](#)), but rigorous and systematic research has challenged whether the rise can be pinned on a Ferguson Effect ([Pyrooz et al., 2016](#); [Rosenfeld, 2015, 2016](#); [Towers and White, 2017](#)). Only one study to date has examined whether de-policing has occurred in the wake of Ferguson and whether such behavior was associated with changes in crime ([Morgan and Pally, 2016](#)). Importantly, this study was confined to a single city—Baltimore.

This raises several important questions: did the high-profile deadly force incident in Ferguson and the subsequent widespread protests and social media attention lead to de-policing? If de-policing occurred, was it associated with changes in the crime rate as the Ferguson Effect hypothesis would suggest? To date, there have been few studies on de-policing in general (see [Morgan and Pally, 2016](#); [Oliver, in press](#); [Rushin and Edwards, in press](#)) and the evidence is mixed in those analyses that do exist. Allegations of de-policing are more likely to be based on political rhetoric, speculation, and media sources ([Leo, 2001](#); [Mac Donald, 2001, 2015](#)) as opposed to comprehensive, data-driven analysis. Rigorous empirical inquiry has not kept pace with contemporary accusations of de-policing in the wake of high-profile events involving law enforcement.

The current study examines de-policing among municipal police agencies in Missouri—arguably “ground zero” for the alleged Ferguson Effect—by addressing three main issues. First, we assess the extent to which de-policing occurred among 118 law enforcement departments serving municipalities with over 5000 residents in the state by examining changes in both the quantity (i.e., standardized rates of traffic/vehicle stops, searches, and arrests) and quality (i.e., contraband “hit rates”) of policing from 2014 to 2015. This represents, to our knowledge, one of the largest studies of de-policing to date. Much of the de-policing literature focuses solely on the quantity of policing (e.g., stop rates or arrests) changes after an exogenous event like a high-profile shooting or consent decree ([Morgan and Pally, 2016](#); [Rushin and Edwards, in press](#)). While important, this type of inquiry does not consider whether the quality of policing is influenced by an environmental jolt. High-profile police shootings may lead to de-policing in the form of reduced stop, search, or arrest rates, but perhaps this is a good thing if it also corresponds to increased success rates of finding contraband ([Fagan and Ash, in press](#)).

Second, and consistent with previous theoretical hypotheses (see [Cooper, 2002](#)), we also test the impact that a jurisdiction's proportion of African-American residents might have on de-policing. Namely, we explore whether jurisdictions with higher percentages of African-American residents—those areas most impacted by the negative attention from police shooting incidents—are more prone to de-policing. Finally, we examine whether any observed de-policing behavior is associated with changes in the crime rate across the Missouri agencies included in our sample. The overarching goals of our study are to (1) provide the most comprehensive test of one of the leading mechanisms believed to be a result of the events in Ferguson; (2) identify whether the characteristics of municipalities—particularly racial demographics—are associated with police behavior changes; and (3) determine the extent to which de-policing is indeed related to crime rate increases, as anticipated by leading proponents of the Ferguson Effect thesis.

2. An overview of de-policing research “Pre-Ferguson”

The term “de-policing” has a negative connotation and refers to officers retreating from active police work in response to an event that generates criticism of the police, such as a riot, consent decree, civil lawsuit, or a high-profile deadly force incident. William [Bratton \(1998\)](#), then commissioner of the New York Police Department, and George [Kelling \(1998\)](#) were among the first to discuss the potential consequences of officers disengaging from proactive law enforcement activities. They described de-policing as a causal factor that could lead

to increases in crime due to reductions in the level of guardianship provided to communities. It has been argued that de-policing is often a reaction to racially-charged issues, such as oversight/lawsuits from allegations of racial profiling and civil unrest/riots due to deadly force incidents involving minorities. Thus, there may be a racial component to de-policing. On the one hand, the negative effects of de-policing might be more pronounced if they occur in structurally disadvantaged minority communities ([Cooper, 2002](#))—the very communities that tend to suffer from higher rates of crime and victimization to begin with. On the other hand, there may be benefits to de-policing, particularly when policing has been used, as in the case of traffic stops, as a means to generate revenue for communities ([Fagan and Ash, in press](#)). [Morgan and Pally \(2016\)](#) outline how de-policing, particularly in minority communities, might alleviate the negative effects (e.g., strained community relations) of aggressive order maintenance/broken windows policing tactics (e.g., “stop, question, and frisk”) and limit highly discretionary stops and arrests, which are often viewed as controversial ([Epp et al., 2014](#); [White and Fradella, 2016](#)).

Whether departments and their officers do less in response to external investigations and oversight by the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division (§ 14141) is one of the more common sources of concern regarding de-policing. The few empirical tests of de-policing that have been conducted in the context of Justice Department oversight have yielded mixed and inconclusive results. At the department level, [Stone et al. \(2009\)](#) found no evidence of de-policing in terms of reductions in either pedestrian and motor vehicle stops by the Los Angeles Police Department in the wake of the agency's federal consent decree. However, a Vera Institute of Justice evaluation of the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police uncovered evidence of de-policing after that agency entered into a consent decree with the Justice Department. Focus groups conducted among sergeants and front-line staff revealed that “officers were often unwilling to go above or beyond minimal requirements of their assignments” following the enactment of the consent decree ([Davis et al., 2002](#), pg. 51).

A number of other exogenous shocks have been investigated in a de-policing context. [Shi \(2009\)](#) found a de-policing effect within the Cincinnati Police Department following an April 2001 riot, which erupted after a controversial deadly force incident involving an unarmed black teenager. Misdemeanor arrests, arrests for drug and drinking-law violations, and arrests in African-American communities decreased significantly after the April 2001 riot. Conversely, [Schultz and Withrow \(2004\)](#) found that departments in their sample of 14 cities did not experience reductions in traffic stops after mandatory reporting policies (a form of externally instituted control) on drivers' race/ethnicity were implemented, which was argued at the time to dramatically alter law enforcement reporting behavior. There is also ample support in the literature that officers do not change their behavior in the face of civil lawsuits ([Garrison, 1995](#); [Hughes, 2001](#); [Kappeler, 2001](#); [Novak et al., 2003](#); [Scogin and Brodsky, 1991](#); [Vaughn and Coomes, 1995](#); [Vaughn et al., 2001](#)). [Novak et al. \(2003\)](#), for example, found that officers who were sued in a civil proceeding or personally knew another officer being sued were no less likely to initiate encounters, conduct searches, use force, or make arrests.

3. De-policing in the social media era

The new era of social media diffuses the effects of high-profile police shootings, such as the one that occurred in Ferguson, across the nation (and internationally). Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms, coupled with the ubiquity of smartphones and their ability to capture high-resolution videos, permit people to witness first-hand controversial police behaviors. The process of social media contagion allows coverage of such incidents to spread quickly and to exert an impact in other jurisdictions. For example, social media may allow the actions of police officers in Chicago to affect citizen responses to the police in an entirely different city or state. In the aftermath of high-

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