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## White, black, or blue cops? Race and citizen assessments of police officers

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### Abstract

Contemporary public policy presupposes that police officers should be racially representative of the areas in which they work in order to foster good police-community relations. This article examines citizen assessments of Black and White officers and preferences regarding the kind of officers they want assigned to their neighborhoods. In-depth interviews were conducted with 169 residents of three neighborhoods in Washington, DC. The findings suggest that neighborhood context influences residents' views on the behavior of White and Black officers; that African Americans' evaluations of White and Black officers often challenge the conventional wisdom; and that there is considerable support for a policy of deploying racially integrated teams of officers in Black neighborhoods. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

### Introduction

Traditionally, the racial complexion of police departments mattered greatly to African Americans, and the presence of White police in Black neighborhoods was a major source of friction (Dulaney, 1996; Hawkins & Thomas, 1991; Myrdal, 1944). The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice (1967, p. 167) described White police as an "army of occupation" despised in Black neighborhoods. This commission and the Kerner Commission on Civil Disorders (Kerner Commission, 1968) urged greater recruitment of Black officers in order to foster more impartial law enforcement, defuse tensions with residents, and bolster the image of the police in minority neighborhoods. Since the 1960s, an official consensus has emerged on the value of proportional representation of minority officers in the cities they serve: Greater diversity is expected to result in improvements in police treatment of minorities and also to provide a symbolic sense of "ownership" of police departments. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1981, p. 5) and

the U.S. Department of Justice (1989) shared this view, as did the recent President's Advisory Board on race (President's Advisory Board, 1998, p. 85). Many cities have been under court order to increase the number of minority officers, though most urban police departments remain unrepresentative, in greater or lesser degrees, of their populations.

Is the recommendation for racial matching supported by empirical research? Do citizens believe Black and White police officers behave differently while on the job? Do they care about the race of officers working in their community, as the conventional wisdom holds and, if so, why?

Research on public attitudes almost never asks whether officers' racial backgrounds make a difference to people. Support for the principle of racially representative police departments was tapped in a national poll where 69 percent of Blacks and 48 percent of Whites endorsed the idea that minorities should be given preference in hiring so that police departments will reflect the racial makeup of the popula-

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tion (Newsweek poll, 1995). A recent New York City survey found that 73 percent of Blacks and 57 percent of Whites favored matching the racial profile of the city's police department to that of the city (New York Times poll, 1999). There appears to be much less support, however, for a policy of matching the race of officers to the neighborhoods in which they work. The proportion of Blacks who wanted exclusively Black officers assigned to their communities was 12 percent in Detroit (Aberbach & Walker, 1970) and 33 percent in Milwaukee (Dresner et al., 1981), and only 8 percent of Blacks in Denver said they preferred to deal with Black rather than White officers (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 121). The Milwaukee poll found Black residents to be divided on the question of whether Black officers treat Blacks more fairly than White officers: 32 percent agreed and 38 percent disagreed (Dresner et al., 1981). On the question of whether Black representation on a police force affects citizen impressions of the force, a 1968 analysis of fourteen cities found that Black residents of cities with higher numbers of Black police officers held only slightly more positive views of local police departments than did Black residents of cities with lower numbers of Black officers (Decker & Smith, 1980). These studies date back many years to a time when Black officers were few in number in the cities studied. No recent investigations have examined citizens' perceptions of Black and White officers' behavior or whether people prefer officers of a particular race to be assigned to their communities.

The literature is also deficient in disentangling the effects of race and class upon attitudes toward the police. Survey research shows that race is one of the strongest predictors, with Blacks consistently more likely than Whites to hold unfavorable views of the police (Decker, 1981; Flanagan & Vaughn, 1996; Tuch & Weitzer, 1997). The impact of social class is less clear. In the few studies that have examined the effect of class on opinions of the police, the findings were mixed. Some have found that middle-class Blacks view police more favorably than do lower-class Blacks (Murty et al., 1990; Smith et al., 1991); some have found the opposite (Ostrom & Whitaker, 1974; Weitzer & Tuch, 1999); and others have found no class differences (Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969).

A small body of research suggested that variations in *neighborhood* contexts may be important in understanding citizens' views of the police. Attitudes may be influenced more by the racial and class complexion of neighborhoods than by individuals' race and class backgrounds. The neighborhood-level factors that

may condition attitudes include demographic composition, economic conditions, local crime rates, subcultural orientations to the police, and local policing patterns (Alpert & Dunham, 1988; Apple & O'Brien, 1983; Decker, 1981; Jacob, 1971; Klinger, 1997; Sampson & Bartusch, 1998; Smith, 1986).

According to conventional wisdom, *neighborhood racial composition* shapes residents' relations with police. In this perspective, citizens' views of police are influenced by police practices that vary between White and Black neighborhoods: Black neighborhoods receive worse treatment by police than White communities because of police officer bias or institutional racism, and this differential treatment produces less favorable views of the police in Black neighborhoods. (Inferior treatment includes such things as poor service, unwarranted stops and searches, and physical and verbal abuse of residents.) A competing thesis holds that *neighborhood class position* shapes police-citizen relations. Higher crime rates in both Black and White lower-class communities as opposed to middle-class communities (Krivo & Peterson, 1996) lead to more frequent police-citizen contacts in lower-class areas, increasing the chances of disputatious interactions and, consequently, negative evaluations of police (Bordua & Tifft, 1971; Smith et al., 1991; Thomas & Hyman, 1977; Walker et al., 1972). In terms of local crime and policing, therefore, middle-class Black communities arguably have more in common with middle-class White communities than with poor Black communities, and middle-class neighborhoods should have more favorable relations with police than lower-class communities. The present study examined these two perspectives in specific neighborhood settings in Washington, DC.

## Methods

The data reported here were collected as part of a larger study of citizen attitudes toward the police. In-depth interviews were conducted in 1996–97 with 169 residents of three neighborhoods in Washington: one largely White and two largely African American in composition. The 1990 census data were used to identify tracts that differed racially and socioeconomically. (Following standard practice, selected census tracts served as proxies for neighborhoods. Tracts rarely fit perfectly with socially defined neighborhoods, though there may be a rough correspondence between the two, as was true for the present study sites.) Tracts where the population was more than 80 percent White or more than 80 percent Black

were ranked by median household income and grouped into quartiles. A White middle-class tract (Cloverdale) and a Black middle-class tract (Merrifield) were selected from the top quartile and two adjacent Black lower-class tracts were selected from the bottom quartile and combined to fit with approximate neighborhood boundaries of Spartanburg (neighborhood names are pseudonyms). Washington lacks White working-class or disadvantaged neighborhoods to compare to the present sites; however, interviews were conducted with a small number of White residents of the two Black communities for limited comparisons to the other respondents. Most of the following analysis, however, was restricted to a comparison of the majority respondents of the three neighborhoods (i.e., Whites in Cloverdale and, particularly, Blacks in Spartanburg and Merrifield), since the study was mainly concerned with African American opinion.

Households were randomly selected from telephone directory lists of the selected census tracts.<sup>1</sup> Residents were contacted by letter and then by phone to explain the purpose of the study and to request permission to interview an individual at the residence, randomized by age (twenty-one and over) and gender to increase representativeness. Interviews were conducted by trained interviewers whose race was matched to respondents in order to facilitate rapport and minimize interviewer effects; interviews took place primarily at residents' homes and offices; most lasted between 45 minutes and 1.5 hours. Respondents were paid \$25 in compensation for their participation.

The response rates were 49 percent in Spartanburg, 41 percent in Merrifield, and 59 percent in Cloverdale.<sup>2</sup> The sample sizes were as follows: 58 Blacks and 9 Whites in Spartanburg, 59 Blacks and 8 Whites in Merrifield, and 35 Whites in Cloverdale.

The neighborhood samples were generally representative of the census tracts from which they were drawn in terms of age and income. Men were slightly underrepresented in all three samples. With respect to race, the ratio of Blacks to Whites in the Spartanburg and Merrifield samples was proportionate to population, while the Cloverdale sample was all White. Comparing the three samples, Merrifield respondents were slightly older than their counterparts in the other neighborhoods (median age: Cloverdale = 43, Merrifield = 49, Spartanburg = 38), and the samples were similar in gender (males: Cloverdale = 46 percent, Merrifield = 37 percent, Spartanburg = 39 percent).

Both closed- and open-ended questions were asked. The former allowed for a modest quantitative analysis of responses. Answers to the open-ended questions were analyzed by coding and identifying themes in respondents' attitudes, personal observations, and expe-

riences. The author and a research assistant analyzed the data using the Atlas/ti qualitative software program.

### **The city and the neighborhoods**

The police department in Washington, DC, has the highest percentage of Black officers (69 percent) of any police department in the country, a figure that is proportional to the city's population (66 percent Black) (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1999). Black police chiefs have headed the police department for almost all of the past two decades.

The three neighborhoods are located far apart in areas of the city that are racially and socioeconomically similar to the three neighborhoods. They are not atypical of surrounding neighborhoods. Each locale is served by a different police district. Demographic information on the three communities in Table 1 shows that the White middle-class neighborhood (Cloverdale) and Black middle-class neighborhood (Merrifield) are roughly similar on most indices except racial composition, while the Black lower-class neighborhood (Spartanburg) is socioeconomically disadvantaged. Spartanburg has a mix of housing conditions, including old Victorians, row houses, and some abandoned buildings and vacant lots, but no public housing complexes. Merrifield is one of the most stable and affluent Black middle-class neighborhoods in the city; its residents live mostly in attractive single-family homes, as is true for Cloverdale. Crime rates for 1985–95 were relatively low and fairly similar between the two middle-class communities, but substantially higher for Spartanburg (Table 1). The homicide rate, for example, was six times higher in Spartanburg than in the other two communities during this time period.

Before turning to the central issues of this article, it will be helpful to sketch respondents' perceptions on some related aspects of policing in Washington and in the three neighborhoods, based on other interview questions. As a rule, Merrifield residents were attitudinally closer to their middle-class counterparts in Cloverdale than to their racial counterparts in the lower-class Black neighborhood, Spartanburg. Compared to Spartanburg, people in Merrifield and Cloverdale were more satisfied overall with the city's police force (53, 72, and 74 percent, respectively); less likely to say that at least half of the city's police officers would need to be replaced to produce a good police force (40, 22, 14 percent, respectively); and less likely to believe that police officers in Washington who violate the law, "usually get away with it" (72, 49, 57 percent, respectively). With respect to police activity in the neighborhood, Spartanburg residents were much more likely than their Merrifield

Table 1  
Neighborhood racial composition, socioeconomic profile, and crime

	Racial composition			Socioeconomic profile			
	White (%)	Black (%)	Other (%)	Median household income	Unemployment rate (%)	Families below poverty level (%)	Households on public assistance (%)
Spartanburg	8	88	6	\$18,000	10.4	13.6	13
Merrifield	14	86	0	\$52,600	5.3	2.4	5
Cloverdale	86	11	3	\$61,100	2.5	0.8	5
Washington, DC	30	66	4	\$30,700	7.2	17.0	9
Neighborhood crime 1985–1995							
	Homicide	Rape	Robbery	Assault	Burglary	Larceny	Auto theft
Number							
Spartanburg	55	44	919	1122	1522	2238	730
Merrifield	5	4	104	69	319	614	436
Cloverdale	4	1	54	21	343	545	121
Rate <sup>a</sup>							
Spartanburg	.95	.76	15.9	19.4	26.3	38.7	12.6
Merrifield	.16	.12	3.0	2.0	9.0	17.3	12.3
Cloverdale	.14	.04	1.7	0.7	10.9	17.4	3.9

<sup>a</sup> Mean rate for 1985–1995 per 1,000 population in 1990.

Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1990; Metropolitan Police Department, Washington, DC.

and Cloverdale counterparts to say that police stop people in the neighborhood without good reason (35, 5, 11 percent, respectively); verbally abuse neighborhood residents (35, 7, 9 percent); and often use excessive force against neighborhood residents (28, 4, 6 percent, respectively) (Weitzer, 1999). Spartanburg residents were also inclined to believe that the police have “worse” relations with people in the neighborhood than they do with residents of White neighborhoods in Washington (62 percent said this), while most Merrifield residents (62 percent) thought police have “about the same” relations with them as they do with residents of White neighborhoods; half the Cloverdale respondents thought police have “better” relations with them than with residents of Black neighborhoods, and 22 percent thought these relations were about the same. Regarding the racial composition of the police department, neighborhood differences recede: large majorities in each community (66, 71, 74 percent, respectively) knew the department was predominantly Black.

## Findings

### *Perceived behavior of White and Black officers*

Respondents were asked whether they thought there were “differences in the way Black and White cops who work in this neighborhood act toward residents.”

On this question, similar percentages (over two-thirds) of respondents in the two middle-class neighborhoods saw no differences in the behavior of White and Black officers, while three times as many respondents in Spartanburg perceived racial differences among officers (Table 2). Differences between the sites were statistically significant ( $p < .0001$ ). Neighborhood class position thus outweighs neighborhood racial composition on this question. Responses to the qualitative follow-up questions revealed some important considerations not apparent in the quantitative results.

A quarter of the Cloverdale respondents simply could not answer the question. They reported rarely seeing police in the neighborhood, so they claimed to have no basis for drawing conclusions. Of those who did venture an opinion, most believed there were no differences. Very few said anything even remotely critical of Black officers and the criticisms that were made were rather muted—consisting of unfriendliness, curtness, and some arrogance.

Spartanburg respondents were much more likely than the other two groups to perceive differences in the behavior of White and Black officers, but the differences were not necessarily what was expected. Some views were consistent with folk stereotypes of White and Black officers and others inverted those very stereotypes. Some people articulated the conventional view that White officers are more abusive, brusque, or guarded than Black officers, who are said

Table 2

Do you think there are differences in the way Black and White cops who work in this neighborhood act towards residents?

	Spartanburg %	Merrifield %	Cloverdale %
Yes	45	14	9
No	39	69	67
Not sure	16	17	24
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(56)	(58)	(33)

$\chi^2 = 19.96$ ,  $df = 2$ ,  $p < .0001$  (respondents answering *not sure* were excluded from the test of independence).

to have more affinity with Black residents, understand Black culture, and attempt to get to know local people. These respondents found Black officers easier to communicate with and felt more comfortable around them, while they reported at least some interactional barriers with White officers. For these reasons, Black officers were seen as better suited to police Black neighborhoods. The literature suggests that Black officers do indeed have greater understanding of Black communities than do White officers, though this seems to have little influence on their behavior toward citizens (Decker & Smith, 1980).

Residents of Spartanburg were somewhat more likely than those in Merrifield to see Black officers positively and White officers negatively, though this view was expressed infrequently even in Spartanburg—and alternative views were offered in both neighborhoods.<sup>3</sup> Some Spartanburg respondents noted that White officers behaved *contrary* to the conventional stereotype or presumption of bad behavior: “I see them stopping cars and giving tickets sometimes. They don’t seem like they’re beating them up or throwing them up against the car. It seems like they’re talking to another human being” (Spartanburg woman). White officers were described as giving people “more allowances” and being more “lenient” with residents, so as to avoid charges of racial harassment or unfair treatment, or to reduce the chances of altercations with residents: “I don’t think that a White officer gonna do too much because he know he’s in a Black area, and like this Rodney King thing, it will get out of hand” (Spartanburg woman). In order to counter public expectations of incivility, a young Spartanburg man declared, “White cops usually are a little bit more courteous because everybody automatically thinks they’re going to come off not being courteous.” These views clash with the popular image of White officers, but are consistent with findings of a recent observational study in Richmond,

Virginia, that challenged the commonsense notion that contacts between Black civilians and White officers are typically more conflictual than contacts with Black officers. In fact, White officers were more likely than Black officers to elicit compliance from Black citizens (Mastrofski et al., 1996). Even when White officers act aggressively, they are not universally condemned; instead, there are at least two competing definitions of reality, as reflected in the comments of this middle-aged Spartanburg woman:

Give him some respect, because he is doing his job. Sometimes they’ll say, “Well, he’s White. He’s not doing this. He’s not doing that,” or “Why did he have to shoot that man? He didn’t have to shoot that man.” Hey, but what was the man doing? The police is only doing his duty. But then you got some saying, “He shouldn’t have done that. He should’ve gave him another chance.” Well, how many more chances you going to give a man [who] keeps going around doing the same thing over and over again? If you don’t shoot him, he’s going to end up shooting you, and police have authority to carry a gun and they’re supposed to do their job.

Evaluations of Black officers were also more mixed than conventional wisdom holds. Some respondents claimed that Black officers in general treat Black citizens *more harshly* than White officers, while others limited this assessment to only some officers. Nicholas Alex’s study of Black officers in New York distinguished between “professionals,” who treat Black and White civilians similarly, and “hardliners,” who act harshly toward Blacks in order to assert authority or elicit respect (Alex, 1969, p. 154–160). In the present study, informants who saw Black officers as hardliners offered several explanations for their tough demeanor. First, the newfound power that comes with being a police officer might affect Black more than White officers, given the novelty of this power, typically denied Blacks in the wider society: “They seem to look down on their people. They kick them around,” said a seventy-one year old Merrifield woman. “They’re inferior themselves, so that’s why they look down on people.” A Merrifield man elaborated:

It’s amazing but White officers are far more courteous to Black people than Black officers are. . . . You know, you’ve got a gun and you’ve got a badge. You’re the baddest thing out there. And whatever you say goes. That’s the Black man. That’s the man in charge. The

White officer, when he come to you [he says], “I’m sorry sir, but you ran that red light,” or “Sir, you’re doing this, that, and the other thing.” But the Black officer, he’s in charge, you see. It’s because of the oppression that he comes up under. Well, I understand that. . . . Not all of them are like that, but I would say maybe 80 percent of the Black ones. The White guys, I wouldn’t say that. . . . [Black officers] have the power, and when you take a person and give them a pistol and a badge, he gonna talk to you any kind of way, be arrogant. I think that’s the main thing, the arrogance that Black officers have about being in authority.

The empowerment that comes with the police role is easily abused in a profession where rank-and-file workers enjoy little supervision in the course of their daily activities, and some respondents thought this was most evident among Black officers.

A second factor that may be conducive to “hard-line” behavior is officers’ need to demonstrate to White citizens or White colleagues that they are “blue” and racially unbiased in their dealings with the public:

If the police force in DC was White, I would say [the targeting of young Black males] was racial, but with the police force being Black here in DC, I feel that they feel they have to be harder on Blacks to show White people that, “Hey, we’re not showing any favoritism.” (Merrifield woman)

Just a general observation that I’ve made that Black policemen, especially when they’re teamed up with the White policemen, are more aggressive than the Whites towards Blacks. I get the impression that they’re trying to show everyone that they’re not showing any favoritism because the party is Black. (Spartanburg man)

A contrasting perspective emphasizes *similarities* in officer behavior across race. The literature indicates that occupational socialization in the police fraternity and adherence to the norms of the police subculture tend to equalize behavior. Minority police officers feel obliged to conform to the expectations of White colleagues for reasons of career advancement, at least in White-controlled departments (Leinen, 1984; Riksheim & Chermak, 1993; Sherman, 1983). Is this pressure to conform to White expectations tempered in a city like Washington with a majority Black police force and population, or do

Black officers continue to behave like their White colleagues even in this context?

Most Whites in Cloverdale saw no behavioral differences between White and Black officers in their conduct toward residents (Table 2). It is the color of the uniform, not skin color, that determines police behavior. Cops are “blue,” not Black or White. A police officer’s occupational status eclipses racial background. Succinctly put, “They’re police as opposed to being Black and White,” and, “They’re just cops; they’re people in uniform.”

Most Merrifield people hold the same opinion, but just as the “racial differences” response can vary in substantive meaning, so can the “no differences” response. For example, Spartanburg residents who saw no differences between White and Black officers were somewhat more likely to point to their *equally bad* behavior, while Merrifield residents more often cited their *equally good* behavior—consistent with Merrifield’s generally favorable impressions of the city’s police. Some Spartanburg residents recounted how both White and Black officers acted aggressively and used excessive force, such as affixing handcuffs too tightly or hitting and kicking people. As an elderly Spartanburg man put it, “Black policemen rough up Blacks and White policemen rough up Blacks,” and another resident complained that Black officers

. . . treat you just as bad, and they say, “My brother.” How can you be a brother when you just slammed my head up against that car, showing off in front of the White officer, trying to be like him? No, no, no, no. I’ve seen it done too many times.

This contrasts with assessments from Merrifield, where the behavior of both Black and White officers was perceived more positively. This was again related to neighborhood conditions. Merrifield’s overall image as a “good neighborhood” and its low level of crime and disorder gave police officers little opportunity to engage in bad behavior and had a diffuse leveling effect on officers of both races.

The findings on this question challenge monolithic portrayals of African Americans’ perceptions of the police and suggest that neighborhood class context also plays a role. Some respondents praised Black officers and depicted White officers in complimentary terms. Others described officers in ways quite counter to the conventional stereotypes: White officers not as sadistic or racist but instead as sensitive and fair; Black officers not as enjoying any special rapport with the Black community but instead as

authoritarian and aggressive. Many other respondents, however, particularly in Merrifield and Cloverdale, perceived no racial differences in the conduct of officers working in their neighborhoods. The popularity of this “blue cops” position is striking in light of the conventional wisdom that White officers and Black citizens are locked in conflict and that Black officers have a natural affinity with Black communities. This important finding is only part of the picture, however. Unpacking the “no differences” response revealed a polarity in its meaning to respondents—equally good versus equally bad behavior—and some variation by neighborhood context, with Spartanburg people more likely than Merrifield people to take the negative view.

#### *Preferences in officers assigned to one's neighborhood*

The question of whether citizens perceive behavioral differences in police officers of different racial backgrounds is related to but analytically distinct from their preferences regarding hiring and deployment of minority officers. A handful of previous studies, cited above, suggested that Blacks are divided on the question of assigning Black officers to Black communities, but those studies were conducted many years ago. In the present study, respondents were asked, “If you had a choice, would you prefer to have mostly White or mostly Black officers working in this neighborhood, Black and White teams, or doesn't it matter?” None of the Cloverdale respondents wanted exclusively White officers in the neighborhood, and two-thirds said officers' races are irrel-

evant (Table 3). What matters instead is professional job performance, fairness, honesty, and respect for citizens: “A policeman is supposed to behave the same whether he's Black, White, green, blue, or purple,” said a Cloverdale man. “So, if he was a good police officer and did his job properly, his color would not matter to me at all.”

Just over a third of the Spartanburg and Merrifield respondents agreed that the racial backgrounds of officers working in their neighborhoods did not matter, as long as officers performed their duties well. The substantive elaboration on this “blue cops” theme was largely indistinguishable from that made by the White Cloverdale residents, and the same color spectrum (orange, green, purple, etc.) was invoked to stress the point that the only color of consequence was the blue uniform. What is decisive is the quality of job performance, not skin color. Some respondents' views were based on their own experiences and observations of officers, while others spoke in generalities about the race-neutral way officers should or did behave: “If they see the same thing, I feel like they'd do about the same—a Black and a White cop here in this neighborhood” (Spartanburg woman), and, “They're going to do their job regardless of what race, creed, or color they are” (Merrifield man).

For a *majority* of Merrifield and Spartanburg respondents, however, the racial backgrounds of officers assigned to their communities did matter, as Table 3 shows. Residents of the two Black neighborhoods were in substantial agreement and differed from the Cloverdale respondents; differences between the sites are statistically significant ( $p < .05$ ).

Despite the criticisms of Black officers evidenced in the previous section, virtually no one wanted only White officers working in their community, and none of the African Americans in the sample suggested that Blacks should avoid police work or that Black officers were traitors to the Black population. Criticisms centered instead on the specific activities of these officers. The notion of Black officers as traitors would seem especially untenable in a city two-thirds African American, but more plausible in majority-White cities where Black officers could more readily be accused of serving the White power structure. Studies of two majority-White cities found a segment of the population opposed to Black officers on precisely these grounds: 8 percent of Blacks in Denver viewed minority officers as traitors and did not respect them, and 13 percent of Milwaukee's Black population felt that Black police officers were “selling out” the Black community (Bayley & Mendelsohn, 1969, p. 122; Dresner et al., 1981).<sup>4</sup>

Table 3

If you had a choice, would you prefer to have mostly White or mostly Black officers working in this neighborhood, Black and White teams, or doesn't it matter?

	Spartanburg %	Merrifield %	Cloverdale %
White officers	2	2	0
Black officers	13	5	0
Mixed teams	46	53	35
Doesn't matter	39	35	65
Don't know	0	5	0
Total	100	100	100
(N)	(56)	(58)	(34)

$\chi^2 = 11.62$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p < .05$  (White officers and Black officers were combined to form a single category and respondents answering *don't know* were excluded from the test of independence. The expected frequencies were  $<5$  for 33 percent of cells).

More Spartanburg than Merrifield people preferred exclusively Black officers in their communities, though this was a minority view in both locales (Table 3). These respondents did not subscribe to the notion of deracialized “blue cops.” They preferred Black officers because they are seen as representative of the community, better understand Black people, and treat residents better. Also mentioned was the desirability of reversing the historical mode of policing in Black communities, when “all you could see coming in and investigating were White cops” (Merrifield man), and the need to counter the symbolism of all-White patrols, which would smack of apartheid: “I don’t want to feel like I’m in South Africa,” declared a Merrifield woman.

Much more popular than all-Black patrols, however, are racially mixed teams of officers. A plurality in Spartanburg and Merrifield favored integrated partnerships, as did a third of Cloverdale Whites. Three types of reasons were offered. First, teams have an important *moderating effect* on officers of each race. That is, each member can “check and balance” or compensate for the behavior of his or her partner. For those who believed White officers act too harshly while Black officers act properly toward Black citizens, integrated teams would have a balancing effect. This is consistent with an experimental study that found that subjects perceived mixed-officer teams as less likely to engage in brutality than two White officers (Levin & Thomas, 1997). The obverse dynamic, however, was mentioned by a few respondents who thought Black officers were more aggressive or harder on Black people and that the presence of a White officer would serve as a corrective. For those who believed that *both* White and Black officers have unique drawbacks, integrated teams seemed ideal:

I think [mixed] teams create the necessary balance that actually ends up improving interaction with the residents. If you have an all-White team you could probably have a racial situation where you have Whites who feel that they’re in control and they’re the good guys and they’re patrolling all these bad Black folks. If you have all Blacks, you have a situation where there’s complacency in the sense that they can conduct themselves in any way that they choose because they’re not being governed. If you have the balance, then perhaps you’d have a good relationship. (Merrifield woman)

In short, integrated teams moderate extremes on the part of one or both officers.

A second theme, cited by similar numbers of Spartanburg and Merrifield residents, is that mixed

teams have an *edifying effect* on officers. Partners can socialize one another in ways of dealing with persons of different races, and they can foster interracial understanding more generally, teaching partners that other races are either “just like your group” (Merrifield woman) or, obversely, have somewhat different world views: “Why put all-Black [officers] in this neighborhood? They know us. Let the White man understand where we are coming from, too” (Spartanburg woman). They might also facilitate learning about different types of neighborhoods. Mixed teams will help White officers understand Black communities and help Black officers understand White communities, but this may be more important in Black neighborhoods: On those occasions when White officers “may not understand what is going on, the Black officer could better explain what’s happening or how to approach a person” (Merrifield woman).

Finally, integrated partnerships have important *symbolic benefits*—an argument advanced by similar numbers of Spartanburg and Merrifield residents, and some Cloverdale Whites as well. Respondents made the intriguing claims that such teams personify racial integration in the police force, embody good race relations more generally, or serve as role models for civilians living in racially diverse cities. Policing exclusively by one racial group smacks of segregation and seems to ratify existing racial barriers, but teams signify “unity,” “cohesion,” and “Black and White together,” according to respondents. They are especially useful for diluting the symbolism of an all-White “occupation” force. Spartanburg residents “would probably say it was discrimination if we just had White officers in a Black neighborhood,” said one woman, whose husband added, “It would be a slave neighborhood, they would say.” The specter of predominantly all-White patrols would be particularly objectionable in disadvantaged Black neighborhoods because this would seem to personify White domination over poor Black people:

. . . it would seem like it’s putting your foot on someone’s neck, and you can’t have too many White police officers when you have such a high Black unemployment rate here. . . . You have no education, nothing, and the Whites just come in looking at the plantation. . . . If there were a predominant White showing here, and we did not have the delicate balance, I think that it would look as though Whites are flaunting their authority and patrolling and policing a predominantly Black neighborhood where people don’t have jobs. (Spartanburg woman)

But all-Black police in Black neighborhoods can be symbolically problematic as well, suggesting a segre-

gationist policy: “You shouldn’t see just Black cops in Black neighborhoods and White cops in White neighborhoods,” said a Spartanburg woman. Interracial police patrols are needed as a visible sign of racial integration.

Mixed teams may have the added symbolic advantage of deracializing citizens’ constructions of questionable incidents involving the police and preventing conflicts from erupting: “So if an incident was to occur you wouldn’t have to say that it was a racial incident,” argued a young Merrifield woman. This could also be achieved by all-Black officers in Black neighborhoods, but this argument was not advanced by those few informants who favor all-Black patrols.

These findings, coupled with those of the older polls cited earlier, lend very little support to policies of assigning exclusively White or Black officers to specific neighborhoods in multiracial cities. Not only do most respondents reject the idea of being policed by only other-race officers, they also dislike the idea of deploying only same-race officers in their neighborhoods. Both policies are seen as *regressive*. Integrated teams, on the other hand, are quite popular, because of their anticipated moderating, edifying, and symbolic advantages.<sup>5</sup>

*Neighborhood context*

The bivariate analysis in Table 2 shows a neighborhood-class effect on residents’ perceptions of how Black and White officers act in their neighborhoods, and Table 3 shows a neighborhood-race effect on residents’ preferences regarding the racial complexion of officers serving their communities. Do these relationships hold when the White subsamples in Merrifield and Spartanburg are included and individual-

level variables are taken into account? For example, the fact that the median age of Merrifield respondents was somewhat higher than those of the other two samples may explain some of the observed neighborhood difference on the first question if age is related to satisfaction with the police. The logistic regression analysis shown in Table 4 addresses these questions.

Two logistic models were fitted for each question: One model included a neighborhood-class variable and the other a neighborhood-race variable.<sup>6</sup> Both models included measures of race, income, education, age, and gender at the individual level. Column 1 in Table 4 shows a statistically significant neighborhood-class effect on perceptions of how Black and White police act in the neighborhood. Consistent with the bivariate results, residents of the two middle-class communities were more likely than Spartanburg residents to say that Black and White officers behaved the same, regardless of their individual race, income, education, age, or gender. Neighborhood-race was not significant (Column 2).

Turning to the question on preferences in officers assigned to one’s community, the bivariate finding of a neighborhood-race effect was not supported by the regression. Neither neighborhood-race nor -class was significantly related to this dependent variable net of the effects of the control variables (Columns 3 and 4). Gender was a significant predictor in both models: Women are more likely than men to prefer racially mixed teams. Individual-race was significant in the neighborhood-class model but not in the neighborhood-race model, probably a result of collinearity between individual-race and neighborhood-race. In a model of individual-level variables only (not shown here) race was a significant predictor. It therefore appears that Blacks are more likely to prefer mixed

Table 4  
Logistic regression estimates on attitudes toward officers’ race

	Black and White officers act differently vs. act the same		Prefer Black and White teams vs. doesn’t matter	
Neighborhood class (1 = middle-class)	-1.936**		.302	
Neighborhood race (1 = predominantly Black)		1.186		.572
Race (1 = Black)	.699	-.112	1.091*	.729
Income	.192	.069	.161	.195
Education	-.099	-.238	-.101	-.087
Age	-.022	-.028*	.003	.004
Gender (1 = male)	.180	-.078	-.801*	-.826*
Model $\chi^2$	23.73**	11.22	11.19	11.37
(N)	(121)	(121)	(132)	(132)

\* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p < .01$ .

teams than are Whites, regardless of neighborhood context.

In sum, the multivariate analysis supported the initial bivariate findings of a neighborhood-class effect on perceptions of how Black and White officers act in the neighborhood. Controlling for individual-level factors, residents of the two middle-class areas were more likely than people living in the lower-class neighborhood to say that Black and White officers act the same in their communities. The bivariate neighborhood-race finding on the second question was not supported, however. There were no significant neighborhood-race effects on preferences regarding the racial make-up of police in the community. An individual-race effect was apparent: African Americans tend to prefer racially mixed teams, while Whites tend to say that the racial make-up of officers “doesn’t matter.”

Bear in mind the limitations of the data when evaluating these results: The neighborhood sample sizes were modest and there were no African Americans in the Cloverdale sample and only a small number of White respondents in the two Black communities (eight in Merrifield, nine in Spartanburg), though they were representative of the minority White populations in the two areas. In addition, the analysis was limited to the three neighborhoods under scrutiny in this mainly qualitative study. The regression results could not, therefore, definitively test for neighborhood effects, but they did lend further support to the argument that neighborhood class position helps to shape perceptions on the first question: the behavior of Black and White officers.

## Conclusion

With respect to the behavior of White and Black officers, many respondents subscribed to the “blue cops” principle that occupation outweighs racial identity. Neighborhood class position also appears to play a role, with large majorities of the two middle-class communities, but only a minority in Spartanburg, seeing no difference in the conduct of White and Black officers. That officers’ race has little influence on perceptions of police behavior for most Merrifield and Cloverdale residents is arguably related to the low level of crime and disorder in these communities, which reduces dissatisfaction and friction with officers. Such neighborhood conditions appear to have a leveling effect on residents’ impressions of officers of different racial backgrounds. Another important difference between the two Black neighborhoods lies in the meaning attached to the *no differences* response: Spartanburg residents who took this view were somewhat inclined to point to equally bad behavior between offic-

ers of different races, while Merrifield people tended to think in terms of equally good behavior.

Do citizens prefer same-race officers to be assigned to their communities? The conventional wisdom and prevailing public policy in the United States presumes that this is indeed the case, especially for African Americans. In the communities studied here, there was little support for assigning mostly same-race officers to the neighborhoods. People in Spartanburg were somewhat more likely than in Merrifield to prefer Black officers, but the most common preference in both communities was racially integrated partnerships, while two-thirds of Cloverdale’s Whites said the race of officers does not matter. Reasons for wanting mixed teams ranged from the pragmatic (behavior modification, officer edification) to the symbolic, and similar numbers of Merrifield and Spartanburg respondents cited each of these reasons.

Comparing the results on the two questions raises an intriguing issue: While people in Merrifield were much more likely than those in Spartanburg to say there were no differences in the behavior of Black and White officers, a plurality of residents in both communities favored integrated teams. The belief that there are behavioral differences by race-of-officer rarely leads to a preference for exclusively White or exclusively Black officers and is more often associated with the mixed-teams preference. At first glance this may seem counterintuitive, but the qualitative data yielded a set of justifications for the mixed-team preference that clarifies the apparent discrepancy. Mixed teams were valued because they help to check or neutralize the proclivities of Black and White officers. The differences between White and Black officers are such that they are likely to be overcome by integrated partnerships, which hold the potential for mutual edification and behavioral modification within the dyad. The fact that Spartanburg and Merrifield Blacks were more likely than Cloverdale Whites to prefer mixed teams is consistent with larger racial attitudes in American society, with Blacks more likely to favor integration in all institutional spheres (Schuman et al., 1997). The specter of a White force patrolling Black neighborhoods was almost universally rejected, but there was also little support for assigning mostly Black officers to Spartanburg and Merrifield. The idea of deploying exclusively White *or* Black officers was seen as racially regressive.

Further research is needed to ascertain whether the findings reported here are corroborated in other majority-Black cities with majority-Black police departments,<sup>7</sup> and whether officers of different races are perceived differently in these locales than in majority-White contexts. If this study’s findings are replicated in other cities, it would lend support to a pol-

icy of deploying racially integrated teams of officers in urban neighborhoods.

## Notes

1. Sampling frames were created by Survey Sampling, Inc. of Fairfield, Connecticut.

2. Refusals were influenced in part by the sensitive subject matter. The study was described in both initial letters and subsequent phone calls as research on “citizen attitudes to the police in Washington.” One explanation for the lower response rate in Merrifield was the fair number of elderly residents contacted, several of whom declined to participate because they were ill or for unknown reasons.

3. Respondents gave specific reasons (often grounded in personal experiences and observations) for their evaluations of White and Black officers and, in the next section, for their preferences regarding the type of officers they wanted assigned to their neighborhoods, suggesting that they were not simply giving socially acceptable responses to these questions. Matching the race of interviewer and respondent was designed to reduce socially acceptable responses.

4. The small segment of the African American population that saw Black officers as traitors could be contrasted with more polarized societies such as South Africa and Northern Ireland, where minority group hostility to minority group officers has been much more widespread and intense (Weitzer, 1993; 1995).

5. A study of Black police officers in New York City found that they identified the same three reasons for favoring integrated teams (Leinen, 1984, 183–186).

6. For the first question, *yes* responses were assigned a score of 1, *no* responses a score of 0, and *not sure* responses were excluded from the analysis. For the second question, so few respondents indicated a preference for mostly Black or mostly White officers that to include them in the analysis would produce too many sparse cells. They were excluded, and the question was recoded to compare respondents who preferred racially mixed teams (score of 1) to those who said the race of officers did not matter (score of 0)—the two salient categories that emerged in the bivariate analysis of this question. Neighborhood-race and neighborhood-class were dummy variables. Respondents who live in Merrifield or Cloverdale received a score of 1 on the neighborhood-class variable, regardless of their individual income or education level. Spartanburg residents received a score of 0. For neighborhood-race, scores of 1 were assigned to respondents residing in either Spartanburg or Merrifield, regardless of their individual race. Cloverdale residents were assigned a score of 0.

7. Other major cities with majority-Black populations and police departments are: Albany and Atlanta, Georgia; Birmingham, Alabama; Detroit, Michigan; Gary, Indiana; and Jackson, Mississippi.

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