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## Becoming “Copwise”: Policing, Culture, and the Collateral Consequences of Street-Level Criminalization

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Over the last four decades, the United States has witnessed a historic expansion of its criminal justice system. This article examines how street-level criminalization transforms the cultural contexts of poor urban communities. Drawing on five years of fieldwork in Los Angeles’ Skid Row—the site of one of the most aggressive zero-tolerance policing campaigns to date—the study finds that residents develop and deploy a particular cultural frame—“cop wisdom”—by which they render seemingly-random police activity more legible, predictable, and manipulable. Armed with this interpretive schema, “copwise” residents engage in new forms of self-presentation in public, movement through the daily round, and informal social control in order to deflect police scrutiny and forestall street stops. While these techniques allow residents to reduce unwanted police contact, this often comes at the expense of individual and collective well-being by precluding social interaction, exacerbating stigma, and contributing to animosity in public space.

Over the last four decades, the American criminal justice system has undergone a dramatic expansion, which has drawn increasing attention from sociolegal scholars (i.e., Kohler-Hausmann 2013; Natapoff 2012). Analyses customarily proceed from a now-ceremonial retelling of incarceration statistics: 2.2 million people currently sit in jails and prisons while roughly 5 million people are under some form of correctional supervision (Glaze and Kaeble 2014). Yet while these numbers are staggering, they “both underestimate the reach of the criminal justice system and, in some sense, misrepresent the modal criminal justice encounter” (Kohler-Hausmann 2013: 352). Indeed, incarceration and community supervision are but the tip of a larger iceberg. Below the surface, and often eluding official record keeping, are millions of street-level police stops, infraction citations, and low-level arrests. The best estimates suggest that roughly 40 million people have face-to-face contact with police per

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year (Eith and Durose 2011). Excluding routine traffic stops, 5.5 million people are involuntarily detained by police every year, the majority of whom are released without charge (Brayne 2014). Disproportionately directed toward poor communities of color, recent criminal justice expansion subjects the country's most disadvantaged residents to a consequential form of street-level criminalization in which mundane public behaviors become subject to intense police suspicion, interrogation, and intervention.

This article develops a systematic framework for more adequately analyzing the lived consequences of street-level criminalization. Specifically, it demonstrates that the constant threat of police contact operates as a powerful "cultural agent" that significantly transforms the cultural contexts and social relations of poor communities of color (Garland 1990). This study extends several areas of sociolegal research by bridging scholarship on the collateral consequences of criminal justice contact with cultural analysis. Researchers are devoting increasing attention to the diffuse and deleterious effects of criminalization on the social health and stability of marginalized communities. Cultural analysis provides key conceptual tools for understanding how and why the criminal justice system generates patterned systems of understanding and action among criminalized populations even when criminal justice actors are not actively present. The following pages illustrate that in communities where the threat of unwanted police contact and enforcement looms constant, residents develop and refine a particular cultural frame—what I term "cop wisdom." Cop wisdom allows these individuals to render seemingly-random police activity more legible, predictable, and manipulable. Armed with this interpretive schema, "copwise" residents engage in creative and circumspect tactics for evading, deflecting, and subverting criminal justice interventions.

In the tradition of legal consciousness scholarship, this article thus "de-centers" the law by shifting emphasis from formal legal institutions to the informal processes by which the law "invokes commonplace schemas of everyday life" (DeLand 2013; Ewick and Silbey 1998: 17; Saguy and Stuart 2008). In doing so, the article reveals a pervasive, though unexamined mechanism by which heightened law enforcement (re)produces inequality: While cop wisdom may enable residents to reduce the likelihood of police contact, they often deploy this frame in a manner that constricts vital social interactions, contributes to animosity in public space, and undermines individual and community well-being.

### **Collateral Consequences of Criminalization**

Collateral consequences, or "invisible punishments," refer to the negative effects of criminal justice involvement that typically

manifest *outside* of the traditional sentencing framework (Hagan and Dinovitzer 1999; Travis 2002). Rather than being imposed by the decision of a sentencing court, these effects occur by default through associated social processes. To date research on collateral consequences has focused primarily on the manner in which felony convictions “mark” former prisoners long after the conclusion of their incarceration. Such consequences include exclusion from public or government-assisted housing, employment-related barriers, ineligibility from public benefits, voting restrictions, and deportation (Stuart et al. 2015).

Research has successfully leveraged demographic data and large-scale surveys to uncover the myriad effects of incarceration on individuals and communities. However, far less is known about the collateral consequences of escalating street-level criminalization, such as increased police surveillance, stop-and-frisks, infraction citations, and low level arrests. Unlike incarceration, the daily, street-level manifestations of criminalization seldom show up in official statistics, which makes analyzing their spill-over effects relatively more difficult. Moreover, the sociology of policing has focused primarily on the experiences and perspectives of officers (Bittner 1967; Reiss 1972). While this scholarship has produced rich accounts of how officers’ subjective understandings shape interactions with the public (Van Maanen 1978; Stuart 2014; Stuart 2016; Stuart and Herbert Forthcoming), citizens’ understandings and experiences during these exchanges require more investigation (see Stuart 2015).

Over the past five years, a small handful of ethnographic and self-report studies have redirected attention to the perspective of policing’s targets, particularly the urban poor. These accounts uncover a number of serious, though potentially contradictory effects regarding street-level criminalization. One of the most prevalent consequences is “system avoidance,” defined as the tendency of individuals to avoid vital social institutions (Brayne 2014). Alice Goffman (2014) finds that individuals with outstanding warrants and parole and probation violations intentionally avoid institutions and private spaces, such as hospitals and places of employment, for fear of being discovered and apprehended by authorities. Drawing on nationally-representative panel surveys, Sarah Brayne (2014) confirms that compared to those with no criminal justice contact, individuals who had contact with the criminal justice system had 31 percent higher odds of not obtaining medical care when they needed it. Importantly, those who had merely been stopped by police avoided medical institutions at the same rate as those who had been convicted. Other researchers focus on various interpersonal consequences of street-level criminalization. As Victor Rios (2011) documents, some individuals develop a dangerous and self-

defeating form of hypermasculinity by engaging in physical and sexual domination of their peers. Others commit additional crimes and break rules in an attempt to reclaim dignity and intimidate those who wish to criminalize them. Still others attempt to overcompensate in their appearance and behaviors in order to communicate to authority figures that they are not criminal.

Existing studies of street-level criminalization thus catalogue a range of responses taken up by those subject to elevated levels of law enforcement. However, as researchers continue to seek out additional populations and locations for further case study, it is imperative that we first reconcile these discrete and, at times, contradictory outcomes within a more generalizable theoretical framework. Fortunately, the findings to date provide a useful starting point. Despite the diversity of individual reactions to criminalization, there is a unifying thread running throughout: namely, the central role of *perception*. As Brayne (2014) alludes, perceptions of current or future criminalization may be as consequential in shaping individuals' behavior as the criminalizing practices themselves. Indeed, all of the above responses to criminalization—whether it is avoiding hospitals (Goffman 2014) or acting lawful (Rios 2011)—are born out of individuals' subjective perceptions and understandings of criminal justice actors' tendencies and motivations, as well as their anticipations of how these authorities will most likely “read” and act toward particular situations. As the link between criminalization (a structural condition) and individuals' responses (human action), these indigenous understandings and patterned behaviors fall squarely within the realm of culture (Bourdieu 1977; Swidler 1986; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). Cultural analysis, then, provides the most appropriate conceptual tools for analyzing the concrete mechanisms by which criminalization engenders shared systems of perception among its targets.

### **The Cultural Context of Criminalized Neighborhoods**

In recent years, the study of culture has moved back into the center of social scientific study. Contemporary research no longer conceives of culture as monolithic values, and rarely discusses it as intergenerational, pathological, or independent of structural conditions (see Hannerz 1969; Swidler 1986). Adopting a “cognitive view” (DiMaggio 1997), these scholars instead conceptualize culture as a constellation of evaluative schema, scripts, and repertoires that people use to make sense of their social context. Culture influences action “not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of

habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986: 273). This article focuses on one particular element of this tool kit, namely, “frames.” Formulated most notably in Erving Goffman’s (1974) *Frame Analysis*, frames refer to the interpretive lenses through which we observe the social world and make sense of experience. Frames encode our evaluations and expectations about events, behaviors, and consequences. In doing so, they provide guides for ongoing social action.

Research into the sources and consequences of cultural frames has moved in two related, yet distinguishable directions. On one hand, social movement scholars and media sociologists use the concept of frames to explain the development and adoption of public opinion (see Benford and Snow 2000; Gamson 1992). This research generally asks how various constituencies (i.e. the media, journalists, politicians, social movement organizations, and voters) construct, contest, and mobilize around particular meanings of public issues and events. Whether the media frames nuclear power, for example, as “progress” or a “devil’s bargain” shapes (though certainty does not over-determine) how members of the public make sense of accidents at nuclear power plants (Gamson and Modigliani 1989). On the other hand, scholars interested in more interactional and micro-level processes leverage the concept of frames to explain how and why individuals “read” and act in response to more immediately encountered phenomena (Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010). These researchers focus on the subjective meanings that individuals construct regarding, for instance, the micromovements of others (Lee 2009) or the built environment of their neighborhood (Small 2004). This article pursues this second line of inquiry, as it is more concerned with the impact of aggressive policing on residents’ micro-level, *in situ* readings than their engagement with broader public opinions about policing.

By investigating how residents develop and deploy frames at the interactional level, this article builds on and advances a number of influential studies of urban poverty. Important for the proceeding analysis, much poverty research examines the cultural frames that emerge in poor neighborhoods amid inadequate police protection and the resulting threat of criminal victimization (for reviews see Wacquant 1998; Rios 2011). For example, writing on inner-city neighborhoods in the mid-twentieth century, Kenneth Clark (1965: 86) notes that “the lowering of police vigilance and efficiency” led to the “unstated and sometimes stated acceptance of crime and violence as normal.” Historical accounts indicate a similar condition in LA’s Skid Row. Until the 1990s, city leaders publicly instructed the LAPD to patrol the neighborhood with a deliberately “light touch,” so as not to displace its

poor residents into surrounding, more well-to-do neighborhoods (Goetz 1992; Haas and Heskin 1981). The *Los Angeles Times* captures the results of this formal policy in a 1989 story, aptly titled "Well That's Just Skid Row." According to the column, Skid Row residents had become so "inured to street violence" that "the brutal slayings of two people within two blocks of each other the night before drew far less attention than the taping of an episode of the television show, 'Beauty and the Beast'" (Citron 1989: B3). Inadequate policing and the normalization of crime thus contributes to a "wholesale restructuring of the social, temporal, and spatial organization of everyday life" in which "simply maneuvering one's way through the streets is a major dilemma...that cannot but affect all aspects of neighborhood life" (Wacquant 1998: 30).

Elijah Anderson's (1990) concept of "street wisdom" is arguably the most systematic examination of the specific cultural frames that can emerge as a result of normalized crime. Anderson (1990) demonstrates that without adequate police protection, poor residents are forced to take safety into their own hands, and in doing so, they often develop a sophisticated form of street wisdom, an interpretive framework that "allows one to 'see through' public situations, to anticipate what is about to happen based on cues and signals from those one encounters" (1990: 5). Equipped with this orientation, "streetwise" residents avoid victimization by conducting what we might think of as a "folk criminology," in which they re-interpret their world through the eyes of hypothetical criminals. This cultural frame significantly impacts three important spheres of community life, providing a powerful guide for: (1) residents' self-presentation in public, (2) residents' "daily round," and (3) residents' capacity and willingness to exert informal social control.

As residents become adept at their folk criminology, their self-presentation in public is dominated by attempts to display "safety signals" (Anderson 1990). These are behavioral cues, gestures, and movements intended to ward off danger and reduce unwanted interactions. As Sally Engle Merry (1981) describes, one of the most effective safety signals is to maintain a determined, businesslike manner:

[A]n appearance of self-confidence and strength, and a studied indifference to the safety of pockets or purses where money could be concealed send off signals that a person is a poor choice of a victim. ... Any indications of fear, timidity, or clutching of purse or pocket communicate the opposite: fear and something to hide. (Merry 1981: 175)

Streetwise residents thus understand that their self-presentation in public has to, above almost all else, communicate that they are a poor target for victimization.

The cultural influence of police neglect and routinized victimization is similarly found in research on the daily round of the urban poor—that is, the day-to-day routines by which residents satisfy their basic needs (Logan and Molotch 1987). In order to remain safe, residents constantly consult their street wisdom to re-interpret and act toward their immediate physical and social environment. In his study of a housing project inundated with gangs during the 1990s, for example, Venkatesh (1997) writes that “the manner by which [residents] can move about in [the neighborhood] and surrounding spaces—both *where* they can visit and *how* they get there—is effectively altered once they are forced to acknowledge and incorporate street gang inscriptions” (104). By consulting their folk criminology and anticipating the behaviors of those who might do them harm, streetwise residents thus learn to identify and avoid “hot spaces” (Gotham and Brumley 2002), “no man’s lands” (Suttles 1968), “no-go areas” (Klinenberg 2002), and other places associated with potential victimization.

Problematically, as residents internalize and naturalize this cultural frame, they tend to withdraw from public sociality, which can carry detrimental consequences. Merry (1981: 194) reports that the most cautious residents elect to “stay at home at night, and often prefer not to venture outside alone even in the daytime.” In doing so, however, they are less able to meet new acquaintances, interact with peers, and build the social capital that is consistently shown to help mitigate the negative effects of poverty, unemployment, and homelessness (see; Desmond 2012; Morrill et al. 2005). Revealing the direst consequences of self-sequester, Klinenberg (2002) finds that disaster-related deaths are far more prevalent in neighborhoods where residents are fearful to enter into public, as they are less likely to come into contact with those who might otherwise provide aid.

Closely related to the erosion of public sociality, residents’ preoccupation with criminal victimization is purported to exacerbate “social disorganization,” defined as “the inability of a community structure to realize the common values of its residents and maintain effective social controls” (Sampson and Groves 1989: 777). In Jane Jacobs’ (1993 [1961]) now-classic formulation, residents become unable to serve as capable guardians, or “eyes on the street.” In the absence of adequate social control, these neighborhoods become susceptible to even more crime, igniting a dangerous feedback loop. It is important to note that this relationship between a lack of informal social control and elevated crime has been a driving rationale behind the turn to zero-

tolerance models of law enforcement inspired by the broken windows theory. Proponents of this theory argue that increased police visibility and aggressiveness will reduce residents' previous fear of crime, and in turn embolden residents to become more active eyes on the street (Wilson and Kelling 1982; Hinkle and Weisburd 2008).

In short, throughout the urban poverty literature we can discern a central (though not always explicit) concern with the cultural frames that develop amid inadequate police protection and the resulting threat of victimization. In recent years, however, policing has intensified to historic levels in many of America's most impoverished neighborhoods. While the crime-reduction capacities of zero-tolerance policing remain in serious question (see Harcourt 2001; Hinkle and Weisburd 2008), one thing is certain: Residents are increasingly subject to aggressive and repeated police detainments, interrogations, citations, and arrests for otherwise mundane behaviors. For the urban poor, these interactions often carry the possibility of eviction, homelessness, unemployment, and loss of social services and benefits. These communities are, in a word, "doubly burdened" by the simultaneous threats of both victimization and criminalization. They are overpoliced, yet often remain underprotected.

Against this backdrop, this article asks: How does the omnipresent threat of criminal justice contact influence the cultural frames of poor urban residents? After a brief description of the setting and methodological approach, the remainder of the article analyzes the *cultural* collateral consequences of street-level criminalization. The analysis devotes particular attention to the manner in which aggressive law enforcement, and the cop wisdom it engenders, influences residents' self-presentation, daily round, and informal social control. The article concludes by considering the implications of criminalization on poor urban communities, offering theoretical implications for legal consciousness scholarship and social disorganization research, and presenting evidence regarding the proliferation of cop wisdom in other communities.

## **Setting and Methods**

The following analysis draws on ethnographic data from Los Angeles' Skid Row district—an impoverished, predominantly black neighborhood that is home to one of the most intensive zero-tolerance policing campaigns to date. The fifty block area, located on the eastern flank of the downtown LA's financial district, is home to approximately 12,000–15,000 residents. Two-thirds of the total population resides in the large collection of single room

occupancy (SRO) hotels and small apartments built in the early and mid-twentieth century. Roughly seventy two percent of SRO residents are black, and have a median annual income of just over \$4,500. Almost ninety percent of SRO residents are unemployed, while forty-five percent report a mental illness or disability (Los Angeles Housing Department 2005). Widely considered the “social service hub” of southern California, Skid Row is characterized by an unrivaled density of nonprofit service organizations, boasting over 40 percent of all city shelter beds and over 25 percent of all county shelter beds (DeVerteuil 2006). With one-third of the population classified as homeless, the neighborhood has long held the title of “homeless capital of America.”

Skid Row and the surrounding four miles of downtown fall under the jurisdiction of the Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Central Division. In 2006, under the direction of LAPD Chief William Bratton, Central Division launched an aggressive zero-tolerance policing strategy in Skid Row, called the Safer Cities Initiative (SCI). Deploying an *additional* 80 police officers to Skid Row’s 0.85 mile area, SCI immediately made the neighborhood home to arguably the largest concentration of standing police forces in the nation (Blasi and Stuart 2008, Blasi 2007). In the first year alone, Central Division officers made over 9,000 arrests and issued 12,000 citations. Adhering to the broken windows theory of policing (Wilson and Kelling 1982)—which calls on officers to crack down on low-level infractions and misdemeanors—these arrests and citations were largely for minor offenses like sitting on the sidewalk, loitering, littering, and jaywalking.

Data on the impacts of this policing strategy were collected over the course of five years of ethnographic fieldwork, beginning in early 2007. Throughout that time, I spent between 10 and 30 hours per week in the neighborhood. I concentrated my time in Skid Row’s public spaces, private residences, and neighborhood institutions. I shadowed and informally interviewed a range of residents and peer groups, as well as patrol officers and LAPD supervisors. The bulk of this article draws from data collected while observing the daily activities of two loose groups of residents. The first group consisted of residents who regularly congregate and socialize in and around Skid Row’s two “pocket parks,” often to play chess, talk current events, or exercise. Beyond the time spent interacting in public, I shadowed several of these residents throughout their daily round, into their SRO units, and throughout their court hearings. The second group consisted of roughly 14 street vendors who set up small sidewalk shops along Skid Row’s main thoroughfares. Like many impoverished urban areas, Skid Row is characterized by an active

informal economy (Duneier 1999; Gowan 2010; Venkatesh 2009), which rests at the heart of inhabitants' myriad strategies to make ends meet. Skid Row's vendors sold a variety of products and services, from clothing and canned food to haircuts and cash loans.

These diverse resident groups provide ideal "cases" for examining the impacts of aggressive street-level criminalization on the community context more generally (Rios 2015). Rather than focus on individuals involved in serious criminal activity, who were likely to have experienced frequent police contact and punishment even before the arrival of zero-tolerance policing (see Goffman 2014), this article instead directs attention to the mundane behaviors and people that are newly or increasingly criminalized *as a result* of aggressive law enforcement. This allows the analysis to more precisely isolate the distinct effects of policing while revealing more generalizable social relations and processes.

Ethnographic methods—defined as a form of social research “based on the up-close, on-the-ground observation of people and institutions in real time and space”—is uniquely suited “to detect how and why agents on the scene act, think and feel the way they do” (Wacquant 2003: 5). My fieldwork was specifically intended to uncover residents' lived experiences as they came into contact with the police and cycled through the criminal justice system. I observed approximately 1,500 police-citizen interactions, which allowed me to systematically analyze how street-level criminalization impacts residents' commonsense understandings of their world, and how they act on this local knowledge. Given the heavy police saturation and aggressive enforcement in the area, I was able to take detailed field notes on the periods leading up to, during, and long after these exchanges. Observations were recorded in the stepwise fashion advanced by Snow and Anderson (1987), which consists of making mental and jotted notes in the field, and then expanding jottings in detailed and extensive field narratives following each day's observations.<sup>1</sup> Adhering to an abductive approach (Tavory and Timmermans 2014), I subjected these fieldnotes to multiple rounds of coding, in dialogue with relevant literature. Research questions and foci

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<sup>1</sup> I recorded many of my conversations with Skid Row residents, with their permission, on a digital recorder that I carried throughout my fieldwork. This helped to ensure the accuracy of their statements. Other conversations were documented accordance with ethnographic convention: I utilized the jottings and notes that I wrote “in real time” during interactions to recreate dialogue and statements as I wrote up formal fieldnotes immediately after the conclusion of the day's fieldwork. This also helped to ensure accuracy.

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of inquiry were honed through theoretical sampling, as prominent themes and salient patterns emerged from the data.

### **The Omnipresent Threat of Police Contact**

For Skid Row residents, the threat of police contact looms constant. According to the most comprehensive survey to date, residents report being stopped, questioned, and frisked by officers and released *without* charge an average of 5.3 times per year (Los Angeles Community Action Network 2010). Residents report that during almost three-quarters of these stops, they were handcuffed, searched, and had their names run through a warrant database. However, these numbers likely underestimate the prevalence of police interactions. One of the residents I came to know, a middle-aged black woman named Diane, described street stops as so regular that they had become, in her words, “almost like bathing.” Officers routinely stand at busy intersections, stopping, interrogating, and ticketing entire groups of pedestrians that are unable to traverse the intersection rapidly enough. This occasionally includes those who require canes, walkers, and wheelchairs. I myself was stopped and/or questioned fourteen times in the first year of fieldwork.<sup>2</sup>

The SCI policy mandates that officers engage in such continuous street stops. In conversations and interviews, Central Division leadership articulated that at least one purpose for detaining and interrogating individuals in this fashion is to enable officers to search for narcotics or evidence of other criminal behavior. In the words of a senior officer:

You won't believe the stuff [narcotics] we pull off people in the course of a simple ticket for jaywalking. It's important that we make touches [interrogations] whenever we get a chance, because the drugs are the root of the problems down here. That's what's at the heart of the violence and the crime. You never know when you're gonna pull something off of somebody. I tell you it never ceases to surprise me.

Assuming that *any* individual may be involved in more serious crimes, officers routinely subject a host of mundane and seemingly-innocuous behaviors to intense scrutiny.

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<sup>2</sup> During my second year of fieldwork, I began introducing myself to many of the area's patrol and command officers. I also began conducting fieldwork alongside police officers. This reduced, though certainly did not eliminate, the rate at which I was questioned while traveling through the neighborhood.

The markedly lowered threshold for street stops is exemplified in the manner in which even a resident's outward physical disability can constitute grounds for officer suspicion and further investigation. A 2010 LAPD document, for example, justifies officers' repeated street stops of residents who rely on wheelchairs and walkers:

Some street drug dealers...use the community around them to mask their behavior such as using a wheelchair or walker to conceal their supply of narcotics, while also looking disabled. This also serves as a deterrent to law enforcement as a disabled suspect requires additional legal safeguards and resources in the event of an arrest.<sup>3</sup>

This extreme police vigilance is not lost on Skid Row residents, for whom repeated stop-and-frisks generate spiraling legal entanglements. With each successive police interaction, residents face an increased likelihood and length of incarceration. Consider the experiences of a black resident, named Tex, who split his nights between SRO rooms and the street. One day, in 2009, Tex was walking with several bags of belongings. He stopped to buy a single cigarette (or "loosie") from another pedestrian. Tex set down his bags beside him in order to fish out his loose change from his pocket. Before he could do so, however, two officers on bicycles appeared seemingly out of nowhere. They detained, handcuffed, and searched him against a nearby wall. They ran his name through the warrant and parole databases. After finding no immediate grounds for arrest, the officers issued him a citation for LAMC 41.18(a)—a municipal ordinance that prohibits pedestrians from obstructing the sidewalk. According to the officers, his belongings, which he had set down only moments earlier, were impeding the flow of pedestrian traffic. With his sole income coming from a monthly General Relief (GR) check of \$221, Tex resigned that he would not be able to pay the nearly \$200 fine. After sleeping on the streets for eight months, the fine increased to over \$500 and a warrant was issued for his arrest. Tex only became aware of this when he was rustled from his tent at 6:15 am. He had overslept the legal "camping" hours designated by LAMC 41.18(d)—a prohibition against sitting, lying, or sleeping on the sidewalk. The officers arrested him on account of his current offense, outstanding warrant, and unpaid fines. After spending three days in jail, the judge issued Tex a twelve-month suspended sentence and an additional \$195 fine. He warned Tex

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<sup>3</sup> Complaint to Enjoin, Abate, and Prevent Public Nuisance Activity, pages 8–9.

that any future citations or arrests would result in a far harsher sentence.

Even short jail stints like Tex's carry dire consequences. Arrest and incarceration rendered at least five residents I came to know unable to pay their rent on time, which led to their prompt eviction. As they sat behind bars, their landlords removed and dumped all of their belongings onto the sidewalk in front of their buildings. They were also burdened with the stamp of "abandonment" on their rental histories, which made securing affordable and adequate housing even more difficult.

### **Becoming "Copwise"**

Skid Row residents quickly recognize that refraining from illegal activity is insufficient to eliminate unwanted, unwarranted, and sometimes violent police contact and its residual consequences. In response, some residents engage in additional, proactive strategies to more effectively avoid and avert officer scrutiny. These residents recognize that, far from behaving randomly, officers adhere to what police scholars describe as an "ideal economy of intervention" (see Bittner 1967). While officers certainly saturate the neighborhood at an overwhelming level, residents recognize that officers' time, resources, and attention are nonetheless finite; officers cannot possibly intervene in every instance in which it might be possible or "necessary." This forces officers to privilege certain individuals and behaviors as the most appropriate targets of their immediate scrutiny and intervention.

Residents convey a striking awareness of officers' dilemma. One afternoon, I stood in one of Skid Row's small parks with a middle-aged black man named Dante. The two of us watched through the park's iron gates as two patrol officers stopped, questioned, and eventually arrested a young black man on the adjacent sidewalk. Dante snickered at the sight. Seconds later, Dante articulated a common understanding of patrol practices by drawing a striking analogy between the police and a predatory animal stalking its prey:

Living down here is like living way back in Africa, you feel me? You got a lion out there in that tall grass just waiting to jump out on your ass. If you don't wanna be lunch then you gotta be ready. It's simple though. The lion, he's lazy, so he's looking for that easy kill. He's looking for the weakest in the herd. Remember, you don't gotta outrun that lion. Shit, nobody can do that. All you really gotta do is outrun the slowest nigga on the safari. It's the same with these motherfucking po-po. It's all about figuring out their psychology and making sure yours is better. They can't jack up everybody.

For residents like Dante, successfully avoiding unwanted police contact thus hinges on residents' ability to accomplish two tasks. First, residents must adequately decipher the general tendencies, considerations, and "psychology," in Dante's formulation, that motivate officers' actions. In other words, they must decipher what *counts* as a privileged police target. Whereas residents in dangerous neighborhoods employ a folk criminology to anticipate victimization, residents in criminalized neighborhoods are forced to engage in what we can think of as a "folk ethnography of policing." To conduct this lay analysis, residents compile "data" that they collect during their own run-ins with police, as well as during those instances that they witness or hear about secondhand.

Skid Row's public spaces and peer groups provide a key forum that allows residents to disseminate and collectively interpret their data on police actions. As they stand in small circles discussing politics, sports, and past exploits, residents devote considerable time to comparing (and contesting) rival analyses regarding why they were able to escape police contact while others may have failed to do so. On one occasion, I stood with Tex and a small group of similarly-aged black men as the conversation turned to Tex's citation and eventual arrest. As he retold the story and relayed the continual hardship it was causing him, another man in the group, named Big Ron, began piecing the scene together. In a somewhat paternalistic tone, he offered Tex an explanation for his initial police stop:

*Big Ron:* Let me ask you this. What do you think those pigs were looking for when they rolled up on your ass?

*Tex:* [sighing in defeat] They were looking to give me a ticket for blocking the road. It's bullshit 'cause I was only stopping to buy a Newport. I was just—

*Big Ron:* Naw naw, man. I mean what is this pig *really* looking for? He don't give a shit about your bag. That's just a smoke-screen. What he's *really* looking for is to see if you're high or if you're *about* to get high.

*Tex:* But I wasn't high! And these motherfuckers still fucked with me.

*Big Ron:* That's my point. You wasn't trying to get high, but that's not the way you *looked*. That's not the way you *looked*. Think about it. . . . You're talking to this cat you clearly don't know. You're digging in your pocket for some change. Yo, imagine that you're one of these pigs. Put all the facts together. What does it look like to them? It looks like you're a straight dopefiend, and it looks like you're buying some dope. Of

course they rolled up on you! They wanted to get all up in your pockets.

*Tex:* I see what you're saying. I kind a asked for it.

Big Ron's folk analysis illustrates how residents collaborate to make seemingly unpredictable police interactions more legible by attempting to "see like a cop." Residents put themselves in officers' shoes to re-interpret the surrounding street scene, pedestrians, and public behavior so as to anticipate who and what will become subject to additional police scrutiny. Seeing like a cop thus relies a double interpretation: in order to anticipate how an officer will behave, residents must anticipate how officers are anticipating problematic and suspicious people typically behave. As Big Ron contends, such problematic actions include striking up conversations with unknown pedestrians and exchanging cash.

Importantly, these folk analyses are more than a thought experiment. This re-interpretive project gives rise to the second requirement for avoiding unwanted police contact: After residents adequately decipher officers' tendencies, they must attempt to adjust their own appearances and behaviors in order to carve symbolic and physical distance between themselves and officers' privileged targets. In doing so, residents restructure their daily lives, down to the level of bodily comportment, so as not to be mistaken for those they perceived to be more "deserving" of police contact. Three of the most discernible adjustments occur in the realms of self-presentation, the daily round, and informal social control.

### **Self-Presentation in Public: Performing "Innocence Signals"**

Paralleling the manner in which residents in dangerous, under-policed neighborhoods strive to cultivate and refine their outward presentation of safety signals (Anderson 1990; Merry 1981), residents in hyper-policed neighborhoods develop the technique of displaying what we can think of as "innocence signals." In Skid Row, residents carefully manage their outward appearances and demeanor in order to reduce their *relative* suspicion in the eyes of officers, to more conspicuously differentiate themselves from officers' privileged targets. Like safety signals, this distancing project extends all the way down to residents' corporeal conduct. Residents make conscious efforts to avoid the subtle actions and unconscious gestures that they anticipate to attract additional police scrutiny and thus lead to a detainment and interrogation.

By far the most prevalent of the innocence signals that Skid Row residents broadcast are those aimed at communicating sobriety, or at least some disassociation with crack cocaine use. One such resident was Mike, a black former auto mechanic. A proud graduate of Narcotics Anonymous (NA), Mike had spent 10 years of his early adulthood battling a crack addiction. He frequently shared his “war stories” with me as we stood watching the nearby street scene. He was quick to point out those he perceived to be, in his words, “A-1 certified dopefiends,” and thus likely to be detained by passing officers in a matter of minutes. One afternoon, he taught me how to recognize addicts:

When you’re high, you do all kinds of stupid shit you don’t even realize you’re doing. Like you see dudes out here that always be scratching their arms. Or like some guys lick their lips a lot. It’s because your body gets all hyped up.

Mike mimicked uncontrollable fidgeting as he spoke.

When I got really high, I was always rubbing the top of my head. You know, like smoothing out my waves [stroking his curly hair so that it lays down flat]. It wasn’t ‘til I kicked my habit that I even realized I had damn near rubbed myself bald!

Much like a poker player’s “tell,” residents interpreted these kinds of habitual movements—what many refer to as “dopefiend shit”—as the precise behavior that betrays addicts’ underlying and “true” identities and intentions to on-looking officers. Mike continued:

The crazy thing is that they’re teaching them that kind of stuff in the academy. They got all kinds of videos and shit, so these guys know you’re high from just looking at you. They can see that shit from halfway up the damn block! They see you before you even see them. That’s why you don’t see me messing with my waves out here no more. Shit, if I got an itch, you better believe I’m waiting to scratch that shit ‘til I get off the block.

While Mike was clearly being hyperbolic, his statements illustrate that residents recognize the need to constantly *perform* sobriety and noncriminality for an audience of officers that fixate on even the most miniscule of gestures, including behaviors as innocent as self-grooming.

Mike’s friends share his sensitivity to innocence signals. When the group of men convene and catch up with one another each

week, they capitalize on their familiarity with and aversion toward dopefiend shit in order to engage in a peculiar form of entertainment and friendly competition. From their vantage point safely inside the park, the men make wagers on which nearby pedestrians, based on their outward appearance and behaviors, are most likely to draw the notice of officers and become subject to a stop-and-frisk. The men frequently cast their spotlight on subtle behaviors that, while liable to escape an untrained eye, the men believe are likely to prompt a stop-and-frisk. Once, as we stood chatting in the park, Steel, a black man in his fifties, pointed to a young Latina woman, no older than twenty-five, as she paced back and forth outside of the park. She continuously chewed on the drawstring of her dark red sweatshirt. She occasionally spoke to passersby, perhaps soliciting them for money. "Check it," Steel said in a soft whisper, as if not to alert her that we were watching. "See how she keeps tugging at her hair? She's in bad shape, man. . . . That right there is a dead giveaway. Watch. Money says when five-oh [the police] hits that corner, they're about to jam her up." Another man named Tony suddenly appeared at my shoulder as Steel finished speaking. "Naw dog," he interrupted, "if it's *my* money, it's on this one over here: Squeaky Clean." He pointed to a mentally-disabled man seated on the curb who meticulously picked at his clothing, attempting to remove small pieces of lint or dirt that only he could see. "Yup," Tony continued, "Squeaky is going to jail today." However, the next passing patrol car singled out neither of these individuals. Instead, the officers detained and arrested a different man walking past. Seeing this, Steel and Tony grumbled in lighthearted disappointment, joking that they had both "lost."

This game serves as more than simple entertainment to pass the time with friends. These exchanges also hold an important instructional quality. As residents debate the fates of those around them, they catalogue and continually reinforce the "dos" and "don'ts" for effectively staying off the police radar, for example: refrain from sudden or nervous movements and curtail excessive self-grooming. Residents are quick to point out those who are unable or unwilling to follow these rules, while building an exclusive community with those who are.

Residents' concerns with outward signs of criminality and their associated performances of innocence carry important sociological implications. Throughout the late twentieth century, urban sociologists documented that the looming threat of victimization and the resulting street wisdom led to elevated levels of distrust. Suspicion of fellow inhabitants prompted residents to internalize and reproduce the negative stereotypes of the urban poor, which stimulated internal differentiation and

mutual distancing as residents constructed rigid moral dichotomies between themselves and their neighbors—as “respectable” versus “shady” (Drake and Cayton 1945), “decent” versus “street” Anderson (1999), or “good” versus “ghetto” (Jones 2010). This process was particularly pronounced in Skid Row districts. As Howard Bahr (1973: 287) described over four decades ago, “Skid Row is where. . .the resident must fight a continual battle to maintain enough self-esteem to live. He may stress little things which set him apart from other men, or continually remind that his past was different, that he is not a ‘bum’ like many of those around him.”

With the arrival of zero-tolerance policing and street-level criminalization, however, residents have been forced to double down on these negative images. Living under the constant threat of police contact, they are even more pressed to highlight and enlarge the symbolic distance separating them from their “less respectable” neighbors. For if residents fail to demonstrate their own elevated level of decency, the result is no longer simply the loss of a preferred sense of self or a failure to secure a favorable identity. In highly-policed neighborhoods, residents who fail to publically convey decency run the risk of winding up in handcuffs or jail. Yet, as they hone their cop wisdom, alter their self-presentation in public, and reduce unwanted police contact, residents become locked in a zero-sum game: Since officers are not simply going to cease conducting street interrogations (organizational mandates demand as much), the most copwise residents end up redirecting and *displacing* police attention onto those residents who are more “deserving” of it. This emerging cultural frame thus exacerbates the internalization and actualization of stigma among the urban poor.

### **The Daily Round: Re-Interpreting Space and Time Through the Eyes of Officers**

Cop wisdom not only encourages residents to monitor and adjust their public appearances and behaviors; it also spurs them to renegotiate their daily round. Residents learn that even the best innocence signals can be rendered moot if deployed in those contexts that give rise to elevated police scrutiny. As a result, residents’ folk analyses can turn from questions about problematic self-presentations to questions about problematic places and times. By seeing like a cop, residents attempt to discern the particular meanings that *officers* attribute to certain streets, buildings, and public spaces, as well as the significance granted to specific hours, days, and weeks. This strategy resembles the interpretive

work documented among housing project residents who must navigate between the crossfire of feuding gangs (Venkatesh 1997). In Skid Row, residents must also concern themselves with steering clear of the LAPD's localized war on drugs.

Tyrell, a soft-spoken black resident, exemplifies how this re-interpretive process manifests in mundane, yet hardly trivial, daily action. After several police detainments on the streets adjacent to his SRO building (two for blocking the sidewalk and one for loitering), Tyrell worried that a subsequent police stop might result in unmanageable fines and the potential of jail time. Facing this dilemma, Tyrell attempted to pinpoint the factors that he believed to be most responsible for his stop-and-frisks. As he relayed one day, the common variable he discovered in each instance was that officers had observed him standing or walking too closely to idle groups of pedestrians that had congregated along the sidewalk. He explained:

The cops around here, they see a bunch of people just standing so they roll up to see if anybody's holding [in possession of narcotics]. And it don't even matter if you're a part of it. I was just passing by a bunch of guys one time and I got caught up. They cuffed me just like they did them. I kept saying I was just walking by, but they told me to shut up. It turns out one of these fools had a pipe and another nigga had a bottle of whiskey. They hauled *my* ass to the station like I was some kind of accomplice. I sat there for four hours, handcuffed to a bench, before they let me go.

Following the ordeal, Tyrell began deploying a number of strategies that he hoped would decrease his chances of being "caught up" near suspicious sidewalk groups again. First and foremost, he re-routed his daily paths through the neighborhood streets to avoid not just those he knew to be associated with drug activity, but virtually any area that attracted large groups. This particularly included the sidewalks near the neighborhood's major service providers, community organizations, and public toilets. Displaying even more dedication to avoiding police contact, Tyrell timed all his walking routes from his front door to the various bus stops in the area. He discovered that if he could sync his walking times with the transit schedule, he could effectively eliminate the need to stand idly on the sidewalk.

Residents' efforts to move purposefully through neighborhood spaces and avoid idle chit-chat often made fieldwork difficult and frustrating. In early field notes, I described Tyrell and several other men as "fast moving targets" as they breezed past

me during serendipitous encounters on the street. On two occasions, Tyrell and I concluded our brief greetings some twenty feet apart, with Tyrell walking backwards, refusing to slow his brisk pace toward his ultimate destination. On one occasion, I jogged to catch up with him. To my surprise, we arrived at the bus stop just as the bus pulled to the curb. We took our seats and began the twenty-minute ride to a nearby discount grocery store. Tyrell apologized for his earlier brevity and explained why he could not afford to miss *this* particular bus. Since his most recent detainment, he had begun restricting his movements beyond his SRO room to the early mornings. Tyrell pointed out of the nearby window to illustrate his point. On the sidewalk, two officers stood questioning a middle-aged black woman who struggled against her handcuffs. Tyrell narrated the scene:

Five-oh still got the skeleton crew out here right now. They won't really start hitting the block hard [patrolling intensely] for a couple hours. They know a lot of people are still passed out from partying last night. When *they* wake up, the cops will roll out. That's when you get caught up.

Anticipating how *officers* anticipated their more privileged targets to behave—including these individuals' sleep schedules—Tyrell was typically off the streets and self-sequestered in his room by the early afternoon. On our return to his SRO building, Tyrell breezed past a group of neighbors who stood just outside the front door. Pointing back at the group, Tyrell warned me that “it's just a matter of time before five-oh comes by rubber-necking and wants to see what's up. I'm not trying to be a part of that.”

Like Tyrell's re-interpretation of various times of the day, residents also draw on their cop wisdom to assign new significance to particular days on the calendar. For Skid Row residents, the first few days of each month can be simultaneously relieving and anxiety-filled. Like many other poor neighborhoods, a significant portion of residents are dependent on monthly social welfare payments, whether it is a GR, Veteran's Benefit, Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Social Security, or disability check. These payments are typically distributed in the first week of the month, a period that residents refer to as “Mother's Day.” During Mother's Day, residents are once again able to pay their rent, buy groceries, wash clothes, settle debts, and afford entertainment. Yet, Mother's Day also promises intensified patrols and increased police stops. During this period, Skid Row's already-busy streets teem with additional activity and a higher number of seemingly-idle bodies as residents trek out to run their various errands. Compounding this dilemma, Central Division leadership and

beat officers openly rationalize that with more money in residents' hands and circulating through the neighborhood, this period will yield the highest number of narcotics arrests. As a result, the division's brass calls for increased narcotics investigations and street stops.

Following an unexpected detainment and arrest just after he received his GR payment, Houston, a razor-thin black resident, resolved to "put his blinders on" when he ventured into public around Mother's Day. This meant refraining from public conversations with strangers *and* nonstrangers alike:

After that arrest, I don't talk to *nobody* out here on these streets. Especially when the checks come out. You just never know. I don't care even if it's somebody from my building. You just never know where the conversation is gonna go, or what kind of dirt somebody else got on *their* shoes. And you don't know if they are gonna put that dirt on *you*. Who knows, there might be a undercover sitting around the corner that's keeping an eye on him. You might end up catching a case [get arrested and charged], just off of talking to this man.

Houston's modifications to his daily round attest to the lengths residents go to literally synchronize their lives with the rhythm of policing.

It is necessary to briefly pause here to highlight the recursive logic underlying copwise residents' cognitive schemas. These re-interpretations of people, space, and time reveals that residents build their cop wisdom on a foundation provided by street wisdom. At the same time, however, cop wisdom also intensifies street wisdom. In the course of their efforts to anticipate and avoid police contact, residents become even more heavily invested in noticing and avoiding potential signs of criminality and danger given off by others as well as themselves. While a resident like Tyrell designs his daily round primarily to preclude police contact, he does so in a way that necessarily reduces his presence in situations that might lead to criminal victimization. In order to avoid being misrecognized by police as an opportunistic street criminal, for instance, Tyrell avoids traversing poorly lit streets at night, where these kinds of offenders might be inclined to search for victims. One ironic result of cop wisdom, then, is that it indirectly leads some individuals to more stridently avoid those who might do them harm. This elevated safety, however, comes at a price.

Residents' paranoid adjustments to their daily round carry important implications for the perpetuation of urban inequality,

as cop wisdom leads residents to intentionally constrict their opportunities for public sociality. These transitory public interactions that criminalized residents strive to circumnavigate are anything but trivial (see Morrill et al. 2005). Particularly for the urban poor, these moments are vital for developing “disposable ties” (Desmond 2012)—the short-lived social relations between new acquaintances that result in reciprocal or semi-reciprocal resource exchange. In the face of inadequate primary and kin-based social ties, many of the urban poor rely heavily on disposable ties with virtual strangers in order to make ends meet, whether it is moving in with one another, pooling income, or raising children. As Matthew Desmond (2012) finds, bus stops are one of the quintessential sites for developing disposable ties. These are locations that gather people with similar needs and provide idle time for low-stakes small talk with strangers.

Problematically, in Skid Row, as in other poor neighborhoods (Rios 2011; Goffman 2014), even bus stops have become subject to heavy police surveillance and enforcement. The cultural frame that develops in response renders the necessary contexts (public space) and behaviors (impromptu conversations between strangers) as things to be actively avoided. Scotty, an unemployed black resident in his thirties, is a case in point. Scotty was excited when he received a lead on an off-the-books job at a shipping warehouse on the edge of Skid Row. Yet, when he arrived at the predetermined time and found the building locked, he quickly grew anxious. He continued banging on the door, but only waited twenty minutes before rapidly heading home. “I can’t be standing out there like a sitting duck,” he told me the next week. “How’s that gonna look to these cops? Like I’m casing the joint, that’s how.” Scotty complained that, due to his fear of being misrecognized by the police, he felt fearful to ask nearby pedestrians for information or help. Dejected, Scotty returned to the warehouse once more before finally giving up on the potential job.

Of course, not *all* residents are so averse to public space. Indeed, many continue to inhabit public spaces and rub shoulders with strangers. Yet, as the next section reveals, when they do so, this contact is frequently characterized by apprehension, fear, and even hostility toward fellow residents.

### **Informal Social Control: “Cooling off the Block”**

Many residents of criminalized neighborhoods simply do not have the option of self-sequester and isolation. For some, basic economic survival requires that they spend much of their waking hours in highly trafficked public spaces. Skid Row’s street

vendors constitute one such group. The nature of their economic enterprise precludes the possibility of simply sidestepping those people, places, and times that are most likely to draw heightened police protection. Turning a profit often requires remaining stationary and visible for multiple hours at a time, in a location that provides a steady flow of potential customers. While afternoons and Mother's Day may bring intensified police patrols, these periods also promise a substantial increase in profits. Faced with this dilemma, these residents mobilize their acquired cop wisdom in an alternative manner, by carving distance from officers' privileged targets through more active and confrontational means. In order to forestall police contact, these residents physically banish and displace particular individuals, behaviors, and scenarios from the immediate vicinity.

Throughout my fieldwork alongside the vendors, I was struck by the rigorous public order they maintained along the adjacent sidewalks. They constantly tidied the sidewalk, quelled arguments, and directed street and sidewalk traffic (see also Duneier 1999). Of all the activities they regulated, however, none received more concerted reproach than drug-related behavior. Upon noticing a nearby pedestrian attempting to roll a marijuana blunt, load a crack pipe, or solicit narcotics from other pedestrians, the vendors would gang up to reprimand the individual and forcefully run them off the block. During one illustrative occasion, a young dealer in crisp clothing and bright red sneakers walked slowly past the collection of sidewalk shops with two desperate-looking customers in tow. He stopped to dig into his pockets and handed a small, clear plastic baggie to one of his customers. Noticing the transaction, a heavy-set vendor named Keith called out to him. "Hey man," he yelled, "I can't have you pushing that poison out here. That shit ain't cool!" At first the dealer did not budge. However, three other vendors quickly extracted themselves from their ongoing sales to take several steps toward the dealer and order him to vacate the area. Seeing he was outnumbered, the dealer put his product back in his pocket and ordered his now-confused customers to follow him up the street.

Continually interfering into the local drug economy and collectively ensuring public order, the vendors appear to be acting as quintessential examples of Jacobs' (1993 [1961]) famed eyes on the street. At first glance, the vendors' behavior also provides modest confirmation of broken windows hypothesis that when residents observe intensified police patrols, they will feel compelled to more actively engage in informal social control. I made a concerted effort to question the vendors about neighborhood conditions prior to the launch of SCI in 2006. To a man, they verified that their voluntary regulation of surrounding activity

had not been as forceful prior to the escalating levels of police contact that they witnessed or experienced firsthand. Yet, field-work observations also revealed that the men undertook these new informal controls as a result of a mechanism that was drastically different than that outlined in the broken windows thesis. The vendors did not become more active eyes on the street because the influx of police *decreased* their fear of crime and criminals. Rather, they began intensely regulating their surroundings because the influx of police *increased* both their fear of police and their heightened probability of police contact.

In fact, prior to the launch of SCI, the vendors treated nearby drug activity with notable ambivalence. A number of the vendors described a tacit “understanding” and “truce” between themselves and local drug dealers. A vendor named Larry, for example, emphasized that the two economic sets of actors draw from the same customer base; the presence of drug sales often increased his own profits. “It was live and let live,” he told me one evening as we stood next to his inventory, which included several piles of snack food and sodas. “To be honest, there were days when I made *more* money when cats were out here selling that chronic [marijuana]. When people get high, they get the munchies. . . . I was right there to hook them up.”

This unspoken truce eroded, however, once the men began to feel the effects of the LAPD’s new enforcement strategy. One evening, I asked Keith, Larry, and another vendor, named Jerome, to detail their experiences. Like Tyrell and Houston, who adjusted their daily round so as not to be caught up near officer’s “real” targets, the vendors described their own criminalization as a case of mistaken identity.

*Keith:* One day they started rolling through like a bunch of storm troopers. At first they were just jacking up all the young bucks that were stupid enough to do their business right out in the open. But once all *those* guys were gone. . . they finally had to do some real police work if they wanted to get the smart ones that were doing their business on the down-low. The police started running around the hood trying to be all Matlock and shit, jacking *everybody* up, getting in *everybody’s* pockets.

*Larry:* That’s when they started looking over *here* all hard after they hit that corner. [Larry took several steps backward, toward the intersection from which officers typically arrive. He pretended to examine the rest of us closely as he played the role of a hypothetical officer watching us from a patrol car.] They’re just over there sitting in the cut, trying to find a reason to jump out. They’re over here like, “I think he’s

about to make a sale.” And what they’re trying to see is if *I’m* involved in it. You know, if I’m contributing to the operation. Like, giving them [dealers] cover, or hiding a package, or making change for them. . .

*Jerome:* And that’s when *we* get caught up! We get hemmed up even though it’s some other cat that’s the one over here pushing.

*Larry:* It’s a real asshole that doesn’t wanna see the difference between what *we’re* doing and what *they’re* doing out here. That’s why I’m steady telling these young bucks to move on up the block with that mess.

Through what they understood to be repeated cases of mistaken identity, the vendors thus concluded that the visible or even *suspected* presence of narcotics activity was likely to result in police suspicion and intervention. While the vendors accepted that they could not eliminate police encounters altogether, they recognized that they were not powerless. As Larry’s role play captures, they tried to reduce their odds of police contact by constantly re-reading the street scene through the eyes of officers and preemptively expelling likely police targets before officers arrived on the scene and carried out this task through more formal, blunt, and punitive means. Referring to this pre-policing task as “cooling off the block,” the men cemented a system of informal social control that neither Jacobs (1993 [1961]) nor Wilson and Kelling (1982) had likely imagined. When the eyes on the street are compelled to see like a cop, the resulting regulation is primarily intended to diminish the reach, impact, and effectiveness of the police. As the remainder of this section details, these informal controls also carry the potential to further undermine community cohesion, undercut the possibilities of individual and collective mobility, and internally reinforce territorial stigma.

### **When the Eyes on the Street See Like a Cop**

In many disadvantaged urban neighborhoods, it is tempting to see *any* increase in collective, voluntary regulation and public guardianship as a significant improvement, no matter its underlying motive. Indeed, at the end of the day, the vendors were effectively eliminating (or at least displacing) drug commerce and related illicit behavior. This raises pragmatic questions for police, city officials, and scholars concerned with improving conditions in marginalized communities. Does it matter that informal controls ultimately emerge out of a fear of police? Does it matter that prohibitions are intended to subvert policing?

An answer to these questions emerges upon cataloging the full spectrum of people and activities that ran afoul of the vendors' informal controls. The underlying motive for voluntary regulations matters immensely, as it determines who and what the eyes on the street come to view as "problematic" in the first place. This process was readily apparent in the vendors' vigorous enforcement of the city's revamped collection of sidewalk ordinances, which prohibit obstructing and sitting on the sidewalk. Recognizing that the sight of individuals violating these ordinances was likely to attract the attention of passing officers, the vendors cooled off the block by fiercely disbanding groups of chatting pedestrians, by preventing homeless people from sitting down on the curb, and by running anyone off who threatened to clog the nearby walkways. As one might expect, some residents were resistant to or incapable of abiding by the men's commands. This frequently led the vendors to respond with the same ferocity with which they approached drug dealers.

When an elderly, homeless, and clearly mentally-disabled man dared to take a seat on the curb 20 yards from the vendors, the men quickly sprang into action. Jerome was the first to notice the man. He walked over to him and demanded that he find a new place to rest. When the man did not reply, Jerome raised his voice and repeated his orders. This caught the attention of two of the other vendors, who launched a chorus of curses at the elderly man. They derided him as a "lazy bum" and "degenerate asshole" as they walked to Jerome's side, bent down, grabbed the man under his arms, and lifted him several feet into the air. The man kicked violently as the three vendors carried him to the far side of the block, where they indifferently deposited him against the wall of a building. Noticing my surprise at their hostility, one of the vendors justified the men's actions. "You know what's gonna happen when one-time [the police] comes and give that dude a ticket," the vendor defended. "When they're done, they're gonna come over here and fuck with us. They like getting two birds with one stone. So we had to get him out of our sphere of influence."

The vendors' verbal and physical intimidation of nearby pedestrians punctuates the fact that their diligent and ostensibly beneficial prohibitions on drug activity and illicit behaviors were necessarily accompanied by animosity, and even cruelty, toward fellow inhabitants engaged in otherwise innocuous, but now-criminalized acts. Compelled to act as surrogate officers and address problems before police officers arrived, the vendors' attempts to cool off the block introduced an additional source of anxiety, fear, and violence into the daily lives of their neighbors. For those who ran afoul of the vendors, the interactions with the

eyes on the street could be just as detrimental as their interactions with police.

### Handling Strangers and Enforcing a New Racial Order

Beyond its capacity to promote aggression along Skid Row's sidewalks, criminalization distorts the theorized benefits of informal control in additional ways. According to both Jacobs (1993 [1961]) and Wilson and Kelling (1982), a prime function of the eyes on the street is to handle problematic strangers. The eyes on the street have a primary duty to identify, approach, and potentially expel anyone who appears "out of place" or lacks a legitimate reason for being present. Through their surveillance and regulation, the eyes on the street thus continually reinforce the neighborhood's normative geography (Cresswell 1996)—that is, the prevailing local notion of what is normal, just, and appropriate within a given location. However, when the eyes on the street are forced to see like a cop, these individuals are propelled to adopt and emulate *officers'* criteria for distinguishing dangerous outsiders from those who rightly "belong" in the neighborhood. In Skid Row, the vendors closely mimicked the elevated suspicion that officers direct toward whites, which led these eyes on the street to stridently eject and prohibit such individuals from the surrounding public space. In doing so, the vendors cemented a new racial order that carried dire consequences for fellow residents.

Consider the vendors' mounting hostility toward Sam, a white, formerly-homeless Skid Row resident. After kicking his alcoholism, securing disability payments, and moving into permanent housing, Sam began selling bootleg DVDs and cigarettes several yards away from the men. As Sam became a more regular presence, a handful of the vendors started expressing their escalating anger. Curious about the mounting animosity, I asked Carter, a usually-friendly vendor, why he looked at Sam with such disdain. At first I assumed that the souring reception was due to increased market competition. Carter's response disproved this hypothesis:

It's the fucking po-po, that's the issue. They come rolling by quick and just kinda look over here real fast after they hit that corner. . . . There's certain things that we know make them stop and give us shit. Sam sticks out like a sore thumb! When you're talking about Skid Row, white is black, you feel me? You know these cops are in their car like, "Hmmm, who is this white guy kicking it with all these brothers? This can't be no good. Let's go check this out." That's all it takes and...you're jacked up.

Over the next two weeks, whenever Sam arrived, most of the black vendors picked up their inventories and moved further down the block. Their hostility toward Sam reached an apex one day, when the vendors ganged up and collectively purged Sam from off the block, much the way they drove off drug dealers.

For the black vendors, Sam's racial identity was a serious problem, though not necessarily because of any racial animosity they themselves might have harbored. Rather, their aversion to the man was rooted in the police contact they anticipated his race to generate. For the vendors, Sam was not "black enough" to inhabit Skid Row's public spaces without arousing police suspicion. Fieldwork alongside Central Division officers confirmed the vendors' preoccupations. Officers openly communicated that, because of gentrification in the areas surrounding Skid Row, well-to-do whites increasingly descend from their nearby lofts and condominiums into Skid Row in order to buy or sell inexpensive narcotics, or to generally "slum it." Officers noted that these individuals were relatively "easy to spot," however, based on their race, as well as their clothing and demeanor. In the words of one patrol officer, "They don't look anything like the people with a legitimate reason for being down here." As a result, officers were quick to detain and interrogate whites who appeared to be "trespassing" in the neighborhood.

The vendors' behavior captures how copwise residents consistently act on their shared understanding that in a criminalized, predominantly black social space, outward associations with, or even close physical proximity to whites is likely to increase the probability of unwanted police contact. The vendors' regulatory behaviors thus coalesced with formal police activities to uphold the prevailing notion that Skid Row is reserved for poor, uneducated blacks. It is noteworthy that despite whatever ambivalence that the vendors may have once held toward dealers, addicts, whites, chatting neighbors, or homeless people, the arrival of zero-tolerance police patrols had the effect of activating animosity, which in turn amplified the economic and social marginalization experienced by Skid Row inhabitants. For when police officers aggressively interrogate "trespassing" whites, investigate groups who congregate along the sidewalk, or deny homeless individuals the opportunity to rest for a moment on the sidewalk, copwise residents will be compelled to launch pre-emptive (and sometimes violent) strikes before the police arrive.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The meteoric expansion of the criminal justice system and the spread of zero-tolerance policing subject the daily lives and

activities of much of America's urban poor to a historic level of police surveillance and enforcement. This study unites research on the collateral consequences of criminal justice and cultural analysis to offer a more systematic approach for understanding the diffuse effects of street-level criminalization. Drawing on the idea of cultural frames, the analysis shows that police hyper-vigilance leads residents to cultivate cop wisdom in order to better circumvent intrusive police contact. By re-reading their physical and social environment through the eyes of passing officers, residents aim to better distance themselves from those individuals, behaviors, and scenarios they surmise to attract officer scrutiny. In Skid Row, the resulting tactics for circumventing the police carry the alarming potential to hinder social capital, spur a hostile and racialized public order, and further actualize stigma. The cultural frames individuals develop throughout interactions with police officers thus mediate their ongoing routines and relationships in a manner that "adds up" to a shared cultural context. It is important to note that we need not view cop wisdom, or any other cultural frame, as monolithic or deterministic. Rather, individuals often hold multiple and even competing frames that they deploy in different contexts and at different times (see Harding 2007).

Conceptually, cop wisdom reconciles poor residents' discrete and, at times, contradictory responses to criminalization currently found in the literature. This study shows that while individuals may resort to contrasting coping techniques—one person might alter their self-presentation in public, another might avoid particular places, and still another might forcibly banish suspicious looking people—these responses are united by a common interpretive project in which these individuals attempt to anticipate officers' perceptions of a given scenario. With each successive police encounter, individuals gain additional opportunities to compile and analyze an increasing volume of data about officers' likely perceptions, tendencies, and behaviors in a given scenario. The variance in coping techniques is thus a product of both past experiences and the situational exigencies at hand.

This article advances sociolegal research in several additional respects. For legal consciousness scholarship, the analysis of cop wisdom directs attention to an unexamined mechanism by which the law shapes the subjectivities and actions of citizens. Here I am referring to the process of "role taking" (Blumer 1986; Stryker 2003) by which Skid Row residents anticipate and internalize the perspective of formal legal actors, in this case police officers. Throughout foundational and contemporary writings, legal consciousness scholars have intentionally shifted focus away from the perspectives of attorneys, judges, and other formal legal

actors to ask how everyday people draw the line between acceptable or unacceptable behaviors (Merry 1990). This move has allowed researchers to better capture how ordinary citizens understand and behave regarding the law. The preceding pages suggest, however, that legal consciousness scholarship can benefit from “re-injecting” these formal legal actors back into our analyses, albeit in a revised manner.

To date, researchers have explained the variations in how citizens view and respond to potentially problematic behavior, such as sexual harassment or offensive public speech, by pointing to demographic factors, including race, class, and gender (Nielsen 2004), or contextual factors, such as workplace or national culture (Marshall 2003; Saguy 2003). Yet, as the Skid Row case reveals, citizens often engage in these normative evaluations based on the evaluations they anticipate that local legal actors will make. Recall that Skid Row residents form normative judgments about things like homelessness or drug activity largely through the eyes of officers. This means that factors like demographics and context still matter, but they necessarily occupy a different position in our explanatory models. These factors will remain associated with citizens’ contrasting schemas primarily because individuals of varying races, classes, and genders (who live and work within different contexts) are exposed to very different legal actors that are operating in accordance with different imperatives. If everyday people are indeed attempting to “see” like one formal legal actor or another, future analyses should make explicit attempts to identify which actor this may be in a given situation, how citizens concretely take on this role, and how these thought experiments inform their subsequent actions.

The findings also advance research on informal social control. Social disorganization theorists tend to operate on the premise that an increase of informal control is an unambiguous improvement for disadvantaged communities (Bursik and Grasmick 1993; Shaw 1929; Sampson and Groves 1989). This increase is seen as a rather straightforward sign that residents have grown more willing to collectively solve neighborhood problems. Yet, as this article demonstrates, not all increases in informal control are equally beneficial. In Skid Row, the increase in street-level criminalization reshapes precisely who and what residents come to define as a “problem” in the first place. Although the vendors increased their voluntary regulations, they did so to the ultimate detriment of community cohesion and vitality. To date, social disorganization research has been primarily concerned with the *quantitative* levels of informal controls—that is, the extent to which voluntary regulation increases or decreases as the result of internal and external stimuli. However, this study indicates that

informal controls have a critical, though surprisingly neglected *qualitative* dimension. Any increases in voluntary regulation mean little and remain decontextualized if we do not also consider who and what is the ultimate target of these regulations.

Regarding the generalizability of cop wisdom, recent scholarship and national events provide evidence that this cultural frame is hardly unique to Skid Row. Indeed, cop wisdom proliferates among criminalized communities across the US and the globe. Over the last several years, the American public has become familiar with the names of an increasing number of young black men killed at the hands of police—names like Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown. In reaction to these deaths, parents of young black men have sought to instill their children with a form of cop wisdom intended to reduce the probability of police contact and violence. One such parenting strategy has come to be known simply as “the talk” (Amber 2013; Brunson and Weitzer 2011). The talk consists of a set of concrete instructions about how to behave when police officers may be nearby. Much like the catalog of dopefiend behaviors compiled and avoided by Skid Row residents, the talk lists a number of “don’ts” for young black men as they move through public spaces: Don’t walk through unknown residential neighborhoods. Don’t carry any dark or metallic items that can be mistaken for a gun. Don’t leave any store without a receipt. Don’t put your hoodie up. Don’t run. The ubiquity of the talk in black households across the nation alerts us to the fact that an entire segment of the American population has been forced to become copwise, with all its advantages and disadvantages, as a rite of passage into adulthood. However, in instructing their children how to decrease the risk of misrecognition by officers, parents inevitably socialize their children to account for, internalize, and act upon the racial and class-based stereotypes that might color an officer’s perceptions. As they instruct their children how to avoid acting like the “real” criminals, parents unwittingly provide an early lesson in lateral denigration and distancing.

The Skid Row data indicate that precisely *how* residents in other communities will act on their cop wisdom depends largely on how they are policed; it will depend on what particular appearances and behaviors officers deem suspicious, out of place, or generally worthy of further investigation. This is ultimately an empirical question, as well as a call for future comparative research. In Skid Row, officers direct much of their attention toward narcotics activity, which leads residents to adopt the corresponding innocence signals. In other neighborhoods, officers may be more concerned with interceding in different matters, such as gang activity or prostitution. Residents’ innocence signals

will likely follow suit. For example, if officers perceive whiteness as a sign of innocence, residents may regard such individuals not as liabilities, as is the case in Skid Row, but rather as assets. While we would need to observe responses to policing in, say, the Bronx, East St. Louis, or Detroit to uncover the specific tactics residents use to avoid or reduce police scrutiny in those places, we will nonetheless continue to find that (the threat of) unwanted police contact intimately shapes residents' perceptions of and interactions with their social and physical environment. We will also find that cop wisdom constricts certain social relationships and activities while emboldening others.

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