COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY, MINORITY THREAT, AND POLICE BRUTALITY: AN EXAMINATION OF CIVIL RIGHTS CRIMINAL COMPLAINTS*

BRAD W. SMITH
Wayne State University

MALCOLM D. HOLMES
University of Wyoming

*A growing body of evidence shows that minorities are disproportionately the targets of police brutality, but important theoretical questions about the causes of that inequity remain unanswered. One promising line of research involves structural-level analyses of the incidence of police brutality complaints; however, existing studies do not incorporate variables from alternative theoretical explanations. Drawing on the community accountability hypothesis and the threat hypothesis, we tested the predictions of two prominent structural-level explanations of police brutality in a study of civil rights criminal complaints. The study included cities of 150,000+ population (*n = *114). The findings reveal that two community accountability variables—ratio percent Hispanic citizens to percent Hispanic police officers and the presence of citizen review—were related positively to police brutality complaints, partially supporting that perspective. Two threat hypothesis measures of threatening people—percent black and percent Hispanic (in the Southwest)—were related positively to complaints, as predicted. The relative degree of support for the two hypotheses is assessed.*

KEYWORDS: Police brutality, police-community relations, police organization, minority threat, racial discrimination.

Belief in equal justice pervades American society. Yet, abiding skepticism prevails among minority citizens. The mistrust expressed by minorities is hardly surprising given their history of differential treatment by

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agents of criminal justice, a problem that is especially apparent in police-minority relations. Police reactions to minority citizens have long been a focus of scholarly research, and studies in this tradition provide ample evidence of minority disadvantage at the hands of police (e.g., Blauner, 1972; Chambliss, 2001; Feagin, 1991; Holmes, 2000; Irwin, 1985; Myrdal, 1944; Sellin, 1930; Westley, 1953, 1970). Although various police behaviors have been called into question, the use of excessive force epitomizes the tensions between minority citizens and the police, and its use directs attention to theoretical questions regarding the function of the police in maintaining the existing racial order.

The legitimate use of force constitutes the essence of the police role (Bittner, 1970). Nevertheless, the reality that the police limit individual freedom requires that their authority be sharply circumscribed in democratic societies (Goldstein, 1977). Accordingly, the use of force may be judged proper or excessive, depending on whether it is necessary and justified to accomplish a legitimate police duty (Kania and Mackey, 1977). It is excessive physical force that most clearly defines police brutality from the standpoint of law (Locke, 1996). Moreover, even though citizens may apply the term police brutality rather loosely to practices such as unnecessary searches and abusive language, excessive force represents their primary concern about police misconduct (Locke, 1996; NAACP, 1995; Reiss, 1968).

Despite a growing body of evidence that minorities are disproportionately the victims of police brutality, important theoretical questions about the origin of that disproportion remain unanswered. One promising line of research involves structural-level analyses of the incidence of police brutality complaints. Recent studies have used multivariate statistical models to examine how theoretically significant characteristics of police departments and communities influence the incidence of complaints (Cao et al., 2000; Holmes, 2000). Although providing insights into the issue, the few existing studies do not incorporate variables from alternative theoretical explanations, limiting inferences regarding the reasons why racial and ethnic minorities are targeted for brutality. Drawing on the community accountability hypothesis and the threat hypothesis, we test the assumptions of two prominent structural-level explanations of police brutality in a study of civil rights criminal complaints.

COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY OR MINORITY THREAT?

The community accountability and threat hypotheses both assume a relationship between race and police brutality, but they diverge with

respect to the origin of that nexus. The community accountability hypothesis suggests that formal and informal characteristics of police departments foster police-minority tensions and promote police violence, a viewpoint that underlies prominent policy proposals to reduce police brutality (e.g., NAACP, 1995; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993). Making police departments more accountable to the communities they serve, for instance, by increasing minority representation, may break down barriers and reduce police brutality. Grounded in the conflict theory of law, the threat hypothesis maintains that the presence of threatening minorities predicts the use of coercive crime control mechanisms, which help maintain the existing social order (Holmes, 2000; Jackson, 1989). In this view, police-minority tensions stem, inevitably, from enduring racial and ethnic divisions in American society that cannot be addressed simply by altering the organization of policing.

THE COMMUNITY ACCOUNTABILITY ARGUMENT

The community accountability perspective embodies a set of closely related propositions derived from an organizational approach that maintains formal and, especially, informal characteristics of police organization influence officers' street-level behavior, including the degree to which they employ excessive force (e.g., Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Westley, 1970). Police work at the street level entails a high degree of discretion and a low degree of visibility. In addition, officers face continual challenges to authority and threats to safety (Skolnick, 1975). Informal norms of police work define extralegal sanctions, particularly excessive force, as normal and essential instruments of control for handling individuals perceived as challenging officers' authority, who pose a threat to their well-being, or who are otherwise discredited (Hunt, 1985; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Van Maanen, 1974; Westley, 1970). Insofar as police see minority citizens as posing a special threat to their authority and well-being, and given that their wide discretionary power allows them to respond differentially to citizens in poor minority areas, encounters with minority citizens enhance the potential for police brutality (Chevigny, 1969; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Westley, 1970).

The tension between the police and minority citizens reflects, in no small part, the occupational insularity and solidarity that typifies police work (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993; Westley, 1970). In the closed society of the police department, where the world is divided into us versus them, informal norms not only support the use of excessive force, they demand that officers be loyal and maintain secrecy when a fellow officer employs it. The social separation and insularity of the police subculture reinforce informal norms about excessive force and, at the same time, diminish police accountability to the citizens they serve. Policy makers and scholars

have prescribed a variety of policies to make departments more answerable to the communities they serve, changes that seek to break down the barriers between police and minority citizens and ameliorate the problem of police brutality (e.g., National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; NAACP, 1995; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993).

The notion of having representative bureaucracies in municipal government received considerable attention following the urban unrest of the 1960s (Stokes, 1997). Since that time, researchers, reformers, and commissions have called for changing the sociodemographic composition of police agencies to improve police-citizen relations and reduce police brutality (Fyfe, 1988; NAACP, 1995; National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; see also Walker, 1985). Advocates of such proposals suggest that diversity within police agencies will reduce hostility between police and citizens of diverse urban communities. Increased employment of minorities, as well as women, in police agencies is said to influence policing through two related mechanisms. First, greater representation of minorities and women may enhance the legitimacy of police agencies in the eyes of many residents and, thereby, improve the quality of interactions between police and citizens. Second, minority and female officers may bring different attitudes and predispositions to the job. For example, minority officers are said to be more capable than white officers of relating to minority citizens (Walker, 1999), and female officers are portrayed as better able to handle volatile situations by de-escalating violence (Lonsway, 2000; Spillar et al., 2000). In addition to introducing different styles to policing, much of the argument implies that minority and female officers will influence white male officers, thus altering the police subculture (Walker et al., 2000).

Citizen review of complaints is another recommendation to increase the accountability of local police to their communities. Despite vigorous resistance from police unions, it has become an increasingly common means to attempt to reduce police misconduct in large cities (Walker, 2001; Walker and Bumphus, 1992). The wide variety of commissions and researchers recommending citizen review has, no doubt, played a part in this growth (e.g., NAACP, 1995; National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1968; see also Walker, 2001). Such processes aim to unlock the historically closed complaints process and overcome the self-protective isolation of the police (Walker, 2001). Advocates assume that police agencies are incapable of fairly investigating and disciplining officers accused of misconduct. By involving citizens in the process, complaints should be more scrupulously investigated, and an increased likelihood of punishment should result, ultimately, in fewer instances of brutality.

Another proposal to increase the oversight of police by citizens is having officers live within the communities they police (NAACP, 1995). Residency requirements are purported to provide many benefits. Officers who live within the community are thought to have greater rapport with citizens, better knowledge of community problems, greater responsiveness to community concerns, and a larger stake in the community (Murphy and Worrall, 1999; Smith, 1980). These outcomes may improve police-community relations and increase police accountability to the public (Coleman, 1983; Smith, 1980).

The most recent recommendation, one yet to be implemented fully, calls for community-oriented policing programs. Community engagement and citizen input are the central ideas of this proposal (Cordner, 1999; Skolnick and Bayley, 1986; Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux, 1990). Greater citizen involvement in policing is said to increase familiarity and rapport between officers and citizens, which should change the behavior of officers toward citizens. Insofar as the community accountability perspective hypothesizes that the relationship between police and citizens is at the heart of the problem, community-oriented policing may offer a viable strategy to reduce the incidence of police brutality (NAACP, 1995; Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993).

THE THREAT ARGUMENT

The conflict theory of law holds that coercive crime control mechanisms regulate threats to the interest of the powerful and thereby help maintain the existing social structure (e.g., Chambliss, 2001; Turk, 1969). Developed to test conflict theory empirically, the threat hypothesis maintains that aggregate measures of minority threat (e.g., percent nonwhite) predict the employment of crime control mechanisms by the police (Liska, 1992). Authorities and white citizens alike may stereotype minorities as dangerous and prone to criminality (Chambliss, 2001; Swigert and Farrell, 1976). Authorities perceive racially dissimilar minority groups as threatening to the social order (Turk, 1969), and a relatively large population of minorities may be seen as posing a substantial problem of social control (Liska and Yu, 1992). White citizens tend to associate racial and ethnic minorities with the threat of crime (Liska et al., 1981), and the presence of minority groups heightens whites' fear of crime (Chiricos et al., 1997; Liska et al., 1981; Liska et al., 1982). Moreover, the police may perceive poor minority citizens as directly threatening to their well-being (Holmes, 2000; Liska and Yu, 1992). Thus, the police may mobilize various strategies of coercive control to protect their interests as well as those of the larger community (see, e.g., Jackson and Carroll, 1981; Jacobs and O'Brien, 1998; Liska et al., 1985; Liska and Yu, 1992; Sorensen et al., 1993).

The salience of threats perceived directly by the police should figure

prominently in their street-level behavior (Holmes, 2000; Liska and Yu, 1992). Minority attitudes and actions symbolize danger, and therefore, the police pejoratively characterize and differentially respond to poor minorities. For their part, minority citizens distrust the police, whom they see as threatening representatives of an oppressive power structure (Chamlin, 1989; Feagin, 1991; Locke, 1996; NAACP, 1995). They may be antagonistic toward the police and employ extralegal violence against them (Chamlin, 1989). The antagonism of minority citizens may, in turn, increase the severity of the informal and formal sanctions levied against them by the police (Smith, 1986; Smith and Visher, 1981). Given a climate of mutual distrust and threat, the mere presence and day-to-day visibility of minority citizens may amplify the risk perceived by the police and, consequently, their willingness to employ excessive force (Holmes, 2000).

In many respects, the organizational dynamics informing this line of reasoning coincide with those suggested by the community accountability perspective (e.g., Holmes, 2000:349–350). Nevertheless, the two arguments diverge fundamentally on the underlying causes of police-minority tensions and the prospects of popular policy proposals to reduce police brutality. Skolnick and Fyfe's (1993) seminal analysis of excessive force, exemplary of the community accountability perspective, argues that the profound racial divisions of the past no longer exist legally within American society. The police cannot openly employ coercive power without eliciting public criticism and, potentially, legal sanctions. Conflict theorists generally argue that structural characteristics of society, manifested via the formal and informal organization of police departments, produce a greater propensity for the misuse of force against minorities (e.g., Chambliss, 2001). Thus, the threat perspective maintains that police-minority relations symbolize the social divisions, deeply rooted in the social structure, that separate dominants and minorities (Holmes, 2000; Jackson, 1989). Coercive power used to control minorities not only protects police officers on the frontlines of the racial divide but also the interests of dominants who fear the criminal threat thought to be posed by minorities. Police violence provides an expedient means to maintain social order, and more privileged citizens avoid interfering with police methods that serve their interests (Chambliss, 2001; Jacobs and O'Brien, 1998).

Predictions about minority representation in police departments clearly illustrate the divergent views. As we have seen, the community accountability argument sees increased minority representation as central to altering the police subculture and reducing brutality. The threat argument suggests, to the contrary, that the police subculture might exert the dominant influence. Minority officers may be pressured into misconduct against minority citizens because of peer expectations exerted within the subculture of policing (Alex, 1969; Locke, 1996). Moreover, minority

officers may perceive members of the minority underclass as a threat and a challenge to their authority (Alex, 1969). For example, middle-class black police officers may, like white officers, perceive lower class black citizens as immediate threats to their well-being. Those citizens may, in turn, see minority officers as simply another part of the oppressive white power structure. Increasing minority representation within police departments may have little effect on police brutality because of the unyielding power of the subculture of policing and the class distinctions and antagonisms within minority communities. In this view, the policies suggested by the community accountability argument may be of limited value because they do not alter the underlying problem, the segregation and deprivation of minority underclass populations (Holmes, 2000).

THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

In general, studies of police-minority relations have relied on individual-level data. A source of systematic data for research on the relationship of race to police brutality has been observational studies of police behavior. Data sets collected for the President's Commission on Law Enforcement and the Administration of Justice and for the Police Services Study (PSS) have been used in several studies of police brutality. The first of these was collected in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., during the summer of 1966, by observers who accompanied police officers on patrol in high-crime precincts. Early analyses of the data indicated that whites were more likely than blacks to be the victims of excessive force, and those experiencing it were more likely to be targeted by an officer of their own race (Reiss, 1968, 1971). Reanalyzing those data with more sophisticated multivariate techniques and measuring reasonable and excessive force as a matter of degree, Freidrich (1980) found that the use of force was unaffected by a citizen's race.

The PSS data were collected during 1977 in 24 jurisdictions located in the metropolitan areas of Rochester, NY, St. Louis, MO., and Tampa-St. Petersburg, FL. Using a measure of coercive authority, a dependent variable that varied from verbal threats to excessive physical force, Smith (1986) found that the police used more coercive authority against blacks encountered in predominantly black neighborhoods. In a subsequent analysis of those data, Worden (1996) separately analyzed reasonable and improper (excessive or unnecessary) force. His findings coincide with the earlier ones, showing that blacks were more likely to be the targets of improper force.

Even these large-scale observational studies of police-citizen interactions contain a very limited number of excessive force cases. Combined, the two data sets contain over 10,000 observations of police-citizen

encounters, but only about 65 involving force judged to be excessive. Although research with these data has yielded important insights, this strategy of data collection is of questionable value for making reliable inferences from complex multivariate models. All the same, it is noteworthy that more methodologically sophisticated recent studies support a link between race and the incidence of excessive force (Smith, 1986; Worden, 1996).

Research directly examining the impact of minority and female police officers on police brutality is limited. Most attention has been directed at the influence of officer race. Although research shows that minority officers are believed to be more knowledgeable regarding minority cultures and communities (Decker and Smith, 1980; Goldstein, 1977), the evidence suggests increased minority recruitment is unrelated to African-Americans' attitudes toward the police (Decker and Smith, 1980). Moreover, individual-level studies show that race has little or no effect on officer behavior regarding basic tasks such as arrest (Riksheim and Chermak, 1993; Smith and Klein, 1983; Worden, 1989). Likewise, research with individual-level observational data has shown no effect of officer race on the use of excessive force (Friedrich, 1980; Worden, 1995). As noted, those data sets contain very few cases of excessive force, and the lack of effects for officer race merits only tentative inferences.

The majority of studies on the influence of women in policing compare male and female police officers on a variety of basic police tasks, generally finding more similarities than differences between the two groups on various indicators of job performance (Balkin, 1988; Morash and Greene, 1986; Snortum and Beyers, 1983; Stalans, 1997). A common difference is that female officers make fewer arrests than males (Bloch and Anderson, 1973, 1974; Sherman, 1975; Sichel et al., 1978). Consistent with the community accountability argument, females also receive fewer citizen complaints (Brandl et al. 2001; Stalans, 1997) and fewer excessive force claims (Spillar et al., 2000). Brandl et al. (2001) argue that female officers receive fewer excessive force complaints because they make fewer arrests, a situation in which excessive force is more likely to occur.

Limited evidence exists regarding the impact of other community accountability variables. The research on citizen review is primarily descriptive and does not systematically examine the effect of review boards on the incidence of police brutality, and the assertion that such oversight deters police misconduct remains unproven (Walker, 2001). With respect to residency requirements, Smith (1980) found that police officers cited restraint in the use of force and civility toward citizens as positive aspects of residing within the city served. To date, however, no studies have directly examined the impact of residency on police brutality. Likewise, there is no empirical evidence regarding community policing

and police brutality. Even very recent data would be of little value in assessing the impact of community policing, because this is a recent innovation and full implementation of such programs could well entail a long-term process (see, e.g., Maguire, 1997).

On balance, individual-level studies provide no clear-cut evidence regarding either the community accountability or the threat hypothesis. The most methodologically sophisticated individual-level studies offer evidence supporting the link between race and police brutality suggested by both perspectives (Smith, 1986; Worden, 1996). It remains unclear whether inclusion of community accountability variables in the statistical models would attenuate that relationship. Even so, individual-level research on community accountability variables provides little evidence supporting the assumptions of the proposed policies. Beyond indicating a link between race and police brutality, research with individual-level data cannot test the predictions of the threat hypothesis, which requires aggregate-level data.

Relying on police brutality complaints data, recent structural-level studies provide more systematic evidence regarding the community accountability and threat hypotheses. One such data set includes citizen complaints about excessive force. Collected by Pate and Fridell (1993) for the Police Foundation, the data contain survey responses from a sample of municipal, county, and state police agencies. Analysis of the excessive force complaints showed that most (89%) were filed with municipal police departments. The proportion of sustained complaints lodged against municipalities by blacks was greater than black representation in the general population, whereas Hispanic complaints were proportionate and other minorities were underrepresented. The distribution of the racial/ethnic identity of the officers named in complaints was proportionate to the population of sworn officers. These relationships, and those involving other community accountability variables in the data set, were not analyzed systematically using multivariate techniques, thus limiting the generalizations of the study.

Reanalyzing the Police Foundation survey, Cao et al. (2000) employed multivariate techniques to assess the effects of organizational factors, including community accountability variables, on the complaint rate for excessive physical force. The percentage of black officers and the presence of a citizen review board were related positively to the complaint rate, both relationships contradicting the predictions of the community accountability hypothesis. Of particular interest, agencies with a greater proportion of black officers had higher rates of citizen complaints alleging excessive physical force. The researchers offer several explanations of this finding. They suggest that black officers may be inclined to violence because they patrol dangerous areas. Moreover, they are younger, more

prone to influence from police organizational climate and peer pressure, and suffer from "double-marginality." Overlooked in these explanations is that communities with proportionately large black populations, thought to be the target of police brutality, also may have proportionately large numbers of black police officers, and the study did not control for percent black in the population.

The finding that citizen review was related positively to the complaint rate is also inconsistent with the usual prediction that such administrative processes reduce the incidence of police brutality. Cao et al. suggest several possible explanations for the finding. First, the creation of citizen review boards may result in increased citizen confidence and, thus, increased reporting of complaints. Second, citizen review boards may be implemented in cities having greater problems with and public outcry over police behavior. Finally, less than 10% of the agencies in the sample had citizen review boards, and the finding may be an artifact of a highly skewed variable.

Also inconsistent with the community accountability perspective, that study showed the percentage of female officers in a department did not influence complaints of excessive physical force after controlling for other organizational variables. Although no explanation for this finding is offered, one may be found in the small percentage of female officers within the departments studied. Women were underrepresented in every department included in the study; the mean representation of female officers was less than 6% and ranged from a low of zero to a high of 39%. Thus, there may have been too few female officers in most departments to influence police behavior meaningfully.

In a related study, also using the Police Foundation survey, Cao and Huang (2000) examined the complaint rate for police abuse of power. In contrast to the other study, percent black officers did not affect the complaints rate. Again, failure to control for percent black in the community means that the effect of percent black officers remains an open question. The presence of a citizen review board was not related to abuse of power complaints. Percent female officers had no effect, as was the case in the study of police brutality complaints.

Another data set includes civil rights criminal complaints alleging police brutality that were investigated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and reported to the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice in the *Policy Brutality Study Fy 1985-Fy 1990* report (DOJ hereafter). Jurisdictions averaging 2+ complaints annually for the period 1985–1990, inclusive, are contained in that data set. The DOJ analysis of the data revealed no discernible pattern in the police brutality criminal complaints. However, that study did not examine variables specified in any theoretical explanation of police brutality. Extending the DOJ data set to include

sociodemographic characteristics of cities, Holmes (2000) tested threat hypothesis predictions for all municipalities with 2+ complaints and for all municipalities with populations of 150,000+. The findings show that measures of threatening people were related positively to civil rights criminal complaints. These relationships included percent black (in cities of 150,000+), percent Hispanic (in the Southwest), and majority/minority income inequality. Although buttressing the threat hypothesis explanation of police brutality, the study did not include any community accountability variables.

Although complaints data appear promising with respect to testing the structural-level community accountability and threat hypotheses, they too suffer difficulties. The Police Foundation study of citizen complaints includes a large number of agencies and several important community accountability variables. Unfortunately, the sample is characterized by a low response rate that cautions against broad generalizations (Pate and Fridell, 1993), and there are substantial problems with missing data (Cao et al., 2000) that further confound generalization. Also, the data set does not include city characteristics or city identifiers, which precludes examination of threat variables such as percent black. The civil rights criminal complaints data (Holmes, 2000) has a related, although correctable, problem; the data set includes structural characteristics of cities, but no community accountability variables.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

We have seen that policy recommendations regarding reducing police brutality, particularly its employment against minorities, are grounded in plausible arguments that suggest changes in the structure of police departments to improve accountability to citizens. At best, however, the empirical evidence concerning community accountability is mixed. Moreover, existing studies do not include the sociodemographic characteristics of communities and, therefore, do not examine the predictions of the threat hypothesis. At the same time, the threat hypothesis has not been tested in conjunction with community accountability variables, the inclusion of which could attenuate the effects of threat variables. We address these issues here by extending the civil rights criminal complaints data set compiled by Holmes (2000) to include community accountability variables. Thus, for the first time, this study combines the central variables of the community accountability and threat hypotheses in a single analysis.

The investigation focuses on municipal police departments in cities with populations of 150,000+. These are the largest police departments in the United States, and they produce most police misconduct civil rights criminal complaints (Holmes, 2000). The complaints analyzed in this study were

investigated by the FBI and reported to the Civil Rights Division of the DOJ during the period 1985–1990, inclusive.[1] The DOJ selectively screens police brutality cases, targeting those with enough substance and evidence to warrant investigation (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993). Therefore, the DOJ data most validly denote patterns of relatively severe police brutality (Holmes, 2000).

METHOD

Data for this study were compiled primarily from four sources: the DOJ *Police Brutality Study FY 1985-FY1990*, *Uniform Crime Reports* for 1985–1990, U.S. Census reports for 1990, and the *Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics Survey* (LEMAS) for 1990. The LEMAS data include virtually all of the largest municipal police departments in the United States, and the survey was used to obtain community accountability variables. The completeness of these sources allowed compilation of data for practically all municipal police departments in cities of 150,000+ residents (n = 114).[2]

As noted, the dependent variable in the analysis was the average annual number of civil rights criminal complaints. This figure was coded from data provided in the DOJ report; the jurisdictions included in the original data had a minimum average of 2+ complaints annually. Following Holmes (2000, fn 4), the value was set at one for cities that were not included in the DOJ study.[3]

The first group of independent variables comprises community accountability measures. Three variables are indicators of the sociodemographic composition of police departments. These include the ratio of percent black in the population to percent black sworn officers in the police

1. Federal prosecution of police misconduct cases is based on Title 18, Section 242, of the U.S. Code, which "applies to anyone who, while acting under color of law conferred by his or her position of authority, willfully interferes with any of the constitutional or federal statutory rights of any U.S. inhabitant" (DOJ, 1991:5).

2. Two cities—Anaheim, CA and Jacksonville, FL—were not included in this study, because LEMAS data were not available for them. One city—St. Paul, MN—that was not included in the data set compiled by Holmes (2000) was added to the analysis.

3. The DOJ study included only cities with the most serious problems of police brutality, defined as cities with an annual average of 2+ civil rights criminal complaints. More than half (56%) of the cities with a population of 150,000+ population cities analyzed here were included in the DOJ data, but it was necessary to include all 150,000+ cities in the analysis to obtain an accurate representation of the pattern of civil rights criminal complaints for all large cities. Failure to include the non-DOJ cities would have produced sample selection bias because, on average, 150,000+ population cities with 2+ complaints had an appreciably larger percent black than did those with fewer than 2 complaints annually (Holmes, 2000:358).

department and the ratio of percent Hispanic in the population to percent Hispanic sworn officers in the department. The higher the value of these variables, the less well represented the minority group within a department. The ratio variables were used rather than percent black and percent Hispanic officers because percent minority variables do not measure degree of minority representation in a department relative to that in the overall population, which is the concern expressed in the literature on improving police-minority relations. Moreover, the percent measures would be problematic statistically, because both percent black officers and percent Hispanic officers were highly correlated ($r > .90$) with their respective percentages in the population. Representation is a different matter entirely, as the ratio of minority population to minority officer variables were only moderately correlated with their respective percent minority variables (see Table 1 below).

The other sociodemographic composition variable was percent female sworn officers. It is appropriate to use a percentage variable in this instance, as the proportion of women in the population of cities would not vary appreciably. The use of a ratio would not meaningfully change the measure, because the numerator of the ratio would essentially be a constant.

Two additional measures of community accountability were included in the study. Residency requirement was coded as a dummy variable, with zero representing no residency requirement and one representing the existence of a formal residency requirement for police officers. Relying on data reported by Walker and Wright (1995), a dummy variable indicating the presence of citizen review was included in the analysis, with zero indicating no citizen review and one indicating the existence of citizen review.[4]

Following Holmes (2000), the independent variables pertaining to the threat hypothesis included index crime rate, percent black, percent Hispanic, and majority/minority income inequality. The index crime rate is a measure of threatening acts. The mean index crime rate ([mean annual index crimes/1990 population] x 100,000) for each city was calculated for the six-year period under study. Percent black and percent Hispanic are

4. Following Walker's classification scheme (2001), we originally measured citizen oversight as an ordinal variable that included five categories ranging from no citizen oversight to independent auditor systems. Thus, higher scores represented oversight systems with greater citizen involvement and independence from the police agency. However, the distribution of this variable revealed that approximately 75% of the cities in the study did not have citizen review; thus, each of the other categories contained very few cases. Although a one-way ANOVA revealed that the mean incidence of civil rights criminal complaints increased linearly across categories of citizen review, the dummy variable produced a slightly better model fit in the multivariate analysis. The results were otherwise identical.

measures of threatening people, as is majority/minority income inequality. Majority/minority income inequality was defined as the ratio of Anglo (non-Hispanic white) median household to the weighted mean of the black and Hispanic median household incomes (the higher the score on this variable, the greater the gap between Anglo and minority household incomes).

Control variables used in the analysis included city population and region. Population is important because it would be expected that cities with comparatively large populations and police departments would produce a higher incidence of police brutality than seen in smaller cities (Holmes, 2000). Region was included because regional differences in racial tension and stratification might influence levels of coercive crime control (Jackson, 1989, 1992). Dummy variables (North [deleted category], South, Northwest, and Southwest) were used to measure region.

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

We begin the analysis with an examination of the correlation matrix, which is presented in Table 1. A perusal of the bivariate relationships reveals two noteworthy points. First, the magnitude of the correlation coefficients does not indicate any obvious problems of multicollinearity. This observation was confirmed by examination of variance inflation factors (VIFs), which indicate the inflation of the variances of regression coefficients compared with those for nonlinearly related independent variables (Neter et al., 1996:386–387).[5] The VIFs obtained for the multivariate model presented in Table 2 below were smaller than 3.0, except for two obtained for the components of a statistically significant multiplicative interaction term, which had VIF values of 4.1 and 5.4. These values are well below the generally accepted limit of ten (Neter et al., 1996:387), indicating that the parameter estimates presented below were not unduly influenced by the correlations among the predictor variables. Second, it may be seen that the correlations between the measures of minority threat and civil rights criminal complaints were relatively large in comparison with those for the community accountability variables and complaints, with the single exception of the citizen review variable. This observation suggests that threat variables were better predictors of complaints, an assessment examined in the multivariate analysis.

A concern with respect to the multivariate analysis was the selection of an appropriate statistical technique to model the count-dependent variable, which was skewed to the lower end of the distribution. We began the

5. VIFs are calculated as $1 \div (1 - R^2)$, where each independent variable is regressed on the remaining set of independent variables. The values of VIF are, therefore, not affected by the metric of the dependent variable.

Table 1. Correlation Matrix, Means and Standard Deviations

		X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8	X9	X10	X11	X12	X13	Y1	Mean	S.D.
X1	Ratio Black Citizens/ Officers	——														1.65	.75
X2	Ratio Hispanic Citizens/Officers	.04	——													1.71	1.81
X3	Percent Female	-.17	-.11	——												9.98	4.16
X4	Residency Requirement	.04	.05	.03	——											.47	.50
X5	Citizen Review	-.08	-.11	.23	.10	——										.25	.44
X6	Crime Rate	.15	.00	.15	-.10	.21	——									9156.39	2921.62
X7	Percent Black	.27	-.20	.37	.25	.18	.35	——								22.34	17.53
X8	Percent Hispanic	-.25	.20	-.23	-.16	.02	.11	-.37	——							12.25	15.70
X9	Maj/Min Income Inequality	.13	-.16	.30	-.06	.16	.27	.47	-.21	——						1.56	.25
X10	Population	.00	.00	.17	.13	.31	.03	.09	.18	.02	——					475256.79	792222.68
X11	South	.22	-.19	.29	-.10	-.24	.11	.48	-.26	.50	-.18	——				.33	.47
X12	Northwest	-.05	-.04	-.07	-.21	-.10	.12	-.24	-.08	-.25	-.05	-.21	——			.08	.27
X13	Southwest	-.23	.13	-.28	-.15	.04	-.08	-.44	.53	-.30	.06	-.44	-.18	—		.28	.45
Y1	Civil Rights Criminal Complaints	-.02	.07	.07	.10	.33	.23	.24	.22	.25	.44	-.02	-.07	.05	—	3.95	5.11

analysis by estimating a Poisson-regression equation, which is an appropriate technique for multivariate modeling of such skewed counts (Neter et al., 1996). However, a Poisson-regression model is unsuitable when overdispersion exists.[6] Comparing MLE estimates from the Poisson equation with those from an equation containing a residual variance parameter, which determines whether the more complex model better fits the data, tests that possibility. The results indicated that overdispersion was a significant problem in the Poisson model (χ^2 (99) = 231.64; $p < .0001$). Therefore, the equation was reestimated using negative binomial regression (NBR), a commonly used alternative to Poisson regression that allows for overdispersion (Osgood, 2000).

The findings from the NBR model are reported Table 2. In addition to the NBR coefficients, we present standardized percent change values (see Long, 1997:224–237) to facilitate interpretation of the results. The standardized percent change values used here indicate the percent change in the dependent variable, *y*, with a one standard deviation increase from the mean of a continuous independent variable, or the percent change in *y* for a one-unit change in a dummy independent variable.[7]

We begin with an examination of the effects of the control variables. City population, predictably, had a statistically significant effect, with larger cities producing more civil rights criminal complaints. Unsurprisingly, this was a sizable effect, with a one standard deviation increase in population resulting in a 33% increase in the incidence of civil rights criminal complaints. None of the region dummy variables had a statistically significant effect on complaints.

One theoretical concern of the analysis is whether community accountability variables influenced the incidence of civil rights criminal complaints. It may be seen that two statistically significant effects were obtained. One of the effects was for the citizen review variable. Its positive coefficient

6. Valid statistical inferences from Poisson regression require equidispersion, or equality of the conditional mean and variance of the dependent variable, which is analogous to the assumption of homoscedasticity in OLS models (Cameron and Trivedi, 1998). In many analyses, the assumption of equidispersion is not met, with the conditional variance commonly exceeding the conditional mean. This problem of overdispersion may result in standard errors being substantially underestimated, which produces misleading tests of statistical significance (Osgood, 2000).

7. The standardized percent change values used here provide an intuitively comprehensible means of interpreting the NBR coefficients. But caution must be used in interpretation, as the NBR model is not linear. Therefore, the magnitude of the standardized percent change value is dependent on the point of reference, which is the mean of the respective variable. Note also that the standardized percent change for a dummy variable may appear relatively large, even when the coefficient is nonsignificant, because the value was calculated for the entire range of the dummy variable as such variables obviously do not change in standard deviation units.

Table 2. Negative Binomial Regression of Civil Rights Criminal Complaints on Community Accountability and Threat Variables

Independent Variables	NBR Coefficients	Standard Errors	Percent Change[a]
Community Accountability Variables			
Ratio Percent Black Citizens/Officers	-.024	.127	-1.66
Ratio Percent Hispanic Citizens/ Officers	.089*	.040	17.37
Percent Female Officers	-.024	.023	-9.65
Residency Requirement	.212	.184	23.94
Citizen Review	.572**	.200	77.22
Threat Variables			
Crime Rate	.000	.000	13.13
Majority/Minority Income Inequality	.564	.417	15.06
Percent Black	.014*	.007	27.80
Percent Hispanic	-.002	.008	-3.09
Southwest x Percent Hispanic	.038***	.012	71.82
Control Variables			
City Population	3.62e-07***	1.11e-07	33.21
South	.177	.249	19.31
Northwest	.507	.349	66.02
Southwest	-.626	.337	-46.33
North[b]	—	—	—
Constant	-.914		
-2 Log Likelihood			
Baseline Model	564.67		
Full Model	488.80		

[a] Indicates standardized percent change values.
[b] Deleted category from the set of region dummy variables; it serves as the baseline for interpreting included categories.
*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

indicates that cities with citizen review produced a greater number of civil rights criminal complaints. Cities with citizen review had a 77% higher incidence of complaints. A sizable positive effect also appeared for the ratio of percent Hispanic citizens to percent Hispanic officers variable. The standardized percent change value indicates that a standard deviation increase in this ratio resulted in a 17% increase in the incidence of complaints. The positive effect indicates that the larger this ratio—i.e., the larger the misrepresentation of officers compared with citizens—the greater the number of complaints. Put differently, this finding indicates that the more closely the proportion of Hispanic officers in a police

department matches the proportion of Hispanics in the general population, the lower the incidence of civil rights criminal complaints.

The other theoretical question concerns the effect of minority threat variables on the incidence of complaints. The findings show that two measures of threatening people had substantial effects. Percent black was related positively to civil rights criminal complaints, with a one standard deviation increase in that variable producing a 28% increase in the incidence of civil rights criminal complaints. In addition to this finding, it may be seen that there was a statistically significant interaction effect involving percent Hispanic. The interaction term for Southwest by percent Hispanic was included in the statistical model because the previous analysis of these data by Holmes (2000) revealed a large effect for this term. The positive coefficient for the Southwest x percent Hispanic interaction term obtained here, coupled with the lack of a significant effect for the percent Hispanic variable, shows that percent Hispanic was related to civil rights complaints just in the Southwest. The standardized percent change value for the interaction term is substantial, indicating a 72% increase in the incidence of complaints with a one standard deviation increase in percent Hispanic. These findings are virtually identical to those reported for cities of 150,000+ population in the earlier study with these data (see Holmes, 2000, Table 1, Model 2), except that here majority/minority income inequality did not have a statistically significant effect.[8]

In concluding the analysis, we examined the possibility of other statistical interactions involving race/ethnicity and region variables, focusing on those of clear theoretical significance. Notably, given that the percent Hispanic effect occurred only in the Southwest, it is plausible that the effect of the ratio of citizens to officer variable varies between the Southwest and other regions. For example, the large populations of poor Hispanics in the southwestern cities may be perceived as threatening by both Hispanic and Anglo police officers (Holmes, 1998). Another important issue concerns the possibility of differential treatment of blacks in the southern United States. Both greater severity and lenity of treatment of blacks in the South have been hypothesized (see Hawkins, 1987). The NBR equation was, therefore, reestimated successively with the inclusion of interaction terms for Southwest X ratio percent Hispanic citizens to percent Hispanic

8. The different effect of the majority/minority income inequality variable in the two analyses could have been a statistical artifact or a result of the change in model specification. The study reported by Holmes (2000) employed OLS regression, which could have produced different findings from the NBR procedure employed here. We reestimated that model using NBR and obtained findings virtually identical to those reported previously. Therefore, the lack of an effect for majority/minority income inequality in the present analysis was a function of the addition of the community accountability variables.

officers, South X percent black, and South X ratio percent black citizens to percent black officers. The findings of these analyses revealed no statistically significant interaction effects.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we sought to examine the effects of community accountability and minority threat variables on the incidence of police brutality civil rights criminal complaints. These two structural-level theories figure prominently in efforts to explain police behavior in relation to minorities. The community accountability perspective suggests that characteristics of police departments influence the street-level behavior of police officers, and that police brutality can be reduced by changing departments to make the police more accountable to the citizens they serve. This viewpoint has particular significance because it underlies leading policy recommendations to reduce the use of excessive force against minority citizens. The central idea of the threat hypothesis is that minorities perceived as threatening elicit the use of coercive crime control strategies by the police. A far more basic social reorganization than proposed by advocates of community accountability is thought necessary to reduce tensions between police and citizens and realize equal justice. The study presented here contains the key variables from each of these perspectives in the analysis of civil rights criminal complaints. It includes municipal police departments in cities of 150,000+ population, which generate the vast majority of complaints filed with the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice.

Clearly the leading proposal to increase community accountability is making police departments sociodemographically representative of the communities they serve, particularly in regard to the racial/ethnic composition of police ranks. Minority representation should create police departments that are more sensitize to and less threatened by the conditions of minority life, reducing the incidence of police brutality. The findings on this point are mixed. We have seen that the ratio of percent Hispanic citizens to percent Hispanic officers is related positively to complaints, meaning that cities with a more proportionate representation of Hispanics in policing have a lower incidence of complaints. Yet, we also have seen that the ratio of percent black citizens to percent black officers has no effect on the incidence of civil rights complaints. The inconsistent findings are of singular theoretical importance.

Race/ethnicity represents only one dimension of personal identity. Occupational roles, particularly those that encompass much of an individual's life, also comprise salient sources of identity. Police departments are characterized by a uniquely robust subculture that insulates its members and fosters in-group cohesiveness (Skolnick, 1975; Skolnick and Fyfe,

1993). Minorities may be co-opted by the subculture of policing and may experience peer pressure to engage in misconduct against minority citizens (Alex, 1969; Locke, 1996). These factors might help explain the lack of an effect for the ratio of percent black citizens to officers variable, but the dissimilar findings for black and Hispanic representation seem inexplicable. Consideration of the social organization of black and Hispanic communities, however, may prove productive in resolving this conundrum.

Scholarship on the social and economic structure of black and Hispanic neighborhoods depicts rather different circumstances. Blacks are deeply impoverished and highly segregated (Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson, 1987), conditions that have been exacerbated over the past half-century by the changing American economy (Wilson, 1987). Working- and middle-class blacks have moved from ghettos that were once heterogeneous with respect to social class, leaving behind the most disadvantaged segment of the population. The concentration of poverty epitomizes the transformation of the inner city, areas increasingly distinguished by social maladies and disorder. Residents of these areas experience social isolation; contact with other social classes and races is either lacking or infrequent. A social and economic schism separates relatively affluent blacks from poor blacks. For a number of reasons, blacks from disadvantaged areas generally would be less-qualified police candidates than those from working- and middle-class backgrounds (Williams and Murphy, 1990), and given the marked class separation within black communities, black police officers may perceive citizens in impoverished black neighborhoods as threats to their physical well-being and authority (Alex, 1969).

Residents of Hispanic barrios have experienced social and economic disadvantage, but conditions that foster social organization also exist (Martinez, 2002). In contrast to the profound unemployment problems of the ghetto (Wilson, 1987), Hispanics have a high rate of formal and informal labor force participation, albeit generally in low-paying jobs (Martinez, 2002). Furthermore, Hispanics in urban America share a common cultural legacy, such as Spanish-language usage and Catholicism. These economic and cultural patterns are reinforced by residential segregation and on-going immigration. Although Hispanics confront difficult conditions, they may also experience a higher degree of social integration than blacks in inner cities. Hispanic police officers may be more integrated into their cultural community, producing empathy for Hispanic citizens and counteracting pressures from the occupational subculture.

Another community accountability variable that influenced the incidence of police brutality complaints, but not necessarily as envisioned by reformers, is citizen review. Cities with involvement of citizens in the review of police brutality complaints produced more complaints. One reason for this seeming anomaly is that cities experiencing public outcry over

police behavior may be more likely to create citizen review mechanisms (Cao et al., 2000). It seems unlikely, however, that the investigative decisions of the DOJ would be affected greatly by local politics. The DOJ selectively investigates police brutality criminal cases, focusing only on those of sufficient substance and evidence (Skolnick and Fyfe, 1993). Nonetheless, in these comparatively serious cases, citizen review may entail more careful scrutiny and greater willingness to refer complaints to federal authorities. In this respect, the finding is consistent with the community accountability perspective, which maintains that complaints would be more scrupulously investigated in citizen reviews. Although increased scrutiny did not result in fewer brutality complaints, citizen review may need more time to deter police brutality in cities with a long history of police-minority tension.

There are a number of plausible, and arguably predictable, explanations for the inability of the other community accountability variables to influence civil rights criminal complaints. Although often purported to reduce police brutality, many of the suggested reforms have underlying limitations. For example, residency requirements may be most effective in medium-size cities where residents can get to know one another (Smith, 1980). In larger cities, such as the ones studied here, officers may live within city limits but in neighborhoods far removed, both geographically and socially, from the areas they work. The finding for female representation is consistent with research suggesting that men and women perform the job of policing similarly. Still, women were under-represented in all departments in the study, which ranged from 2% to 22% female. There may be a critical threshold or tipping point at which there is sufficient representation of women to alter the culture and practice of policing. Under the present circumstances, women may simply become socialized into policing and behave similarly to men.

Turning to the threat hypothesis variables, the key findings are the positive effect of percent black and percent Hispanic in the Southwest, results consistent with theoretical predictions. As noted, urban blacks are extremely segregated and impoverished (Massey and Denton, 1993), and the concentrated minority disadvantage that characterizes urban black populations may produce crime and social disorder (Skogan, 1990; Wilson, 1987). Although to a lesser extreme, Southwestern Hispanics also experience residential segregation and economic disadvantage (see Martinez, 2002; Massey and Denton,1993), as well as serious crime (e.g., Martinez, 2002). Consistent with the predictions of the threat hypothesis (Holmes, 2000; Liska and Yu, 1992), it appears the constellation of social conditions that blacks and southwestern Hispanics confront amplifies the police's perception of minority threat and increases the use of coercive controls such as excessive force. In addition, other factors may contribute to the

strong effect of percent Hispanic in the Southwest. Perceptions of threat may be exacerbated by on-going tensions over immigration from Mexico that is seen as a challenge to Anglo hegemony in the region (Calavita, 1996), and opponents of immigration rely on stereotypes that depict Hispanics as criminal threats to justify exclusionary policies and differential law enforcement (Mirandé, 1987).

Two threat variables did not have significant effects. Majority/minority income inequality is one. It has been argued that social unrest may be more prevalent in communities with a higher degree of racial income inequality, eliciting coercive crime control efforts (Jackson and Carroll, 1981). Although this appears plausible, in diverse urban areas, income inequality may involve a relatively subtle variation not as readily visible to police or dominant group members as the more apparent presence of minority citizens. Crime rate, consistent with the previous study with these data, did not have a statistically significant effect. This may reflect the intraracial nature of crime. The intragroup offenses of minorities threaten neither the police nor the larger community and, therefore, may not demand the employment of coercive crime control (see, e.g., Liska and Chamlin, 1984).

So which perspective better explains the incidence of police brutality—community accountability or minority threat? We think it is the latter. It appears that the threat hypothesis is supported insofar as large effects of the measures of threatening people—percent black and percent Hispanic in the Southwest—exist despite the inclusion of five key community accountability variables featured prominently in various policy proposals to ameliorate the problem of police brutality. Moreover, the findings for minority representation in police departments coincide with structural arguments concerning the social and economic organization of minority communities, which is most consistent with the logic of conflict theory. The degree to which minority representation reduces police brutality may be largely contingent on the social organization of minority communities, conditions unalterable by any policy that focuses solely on the organization of policing.

In closing, we emphasize that police departments in large cities consist of complex bureaucracies with many organizational characteristics that cannot be captured in a single study. For example, definitive answers on the relationship of community policing and brutality must await future data. Still, the findings of this investigation suggest that the causes of police brutality are rooted deeply in the social structure that divides America sharply along race and class lines. The community-policing movement may, indeed, represent little more than a circumlocution, obfuscating the fundamental reality that the police are the social mechanism for the distribution and control of nonnegotiable coercive authority (Klockars, 1988). Selective social control by the police may alienate

minorities who see them as a mechanism of oppression rather than of protection, whereas the attitudes of minority citizens, along with the conditions of their impoverished neighborhoods, may intensify the perception of immediate and on-going threat among the police. Dominant group members also may perceive minorities as criminal threats and tacitly approve of even extralegal strategies of crime control. Thus, a far more basic social reorganization than envisioned by advocates of community accountability may be necessary to reduce tensions between police and minority citizens. Yet, much research on police organization and police brutality remains to be done, and it would be premature to draw anything more than guarded conclusions before exhausting that line of inquiry.

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Brad W. Smith is Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice at Wayne State University. His research has focused on policing, including studies of police behavior, citizens' attitudes toward the police, and community policing. His current research examines citizens' satisfaction with the police and police killings of felons.

Malcolm D. Holmes is Professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Wyoming. He has published widely on the differential treatment of racial and ethnic minorities in the criminal justice system. His present research focuses on issues of ethnicity and justice in the southwestern United States.