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# The State from Below: Distorted Responsiveness in Policed Communities

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## Abstract

This article uses a new technology, “Portals,” to initiate conversations about policing between individuals in communities where this form of state action is concentrated. Based on more than 800 recorded and transcribed conversations across 12 neighborhoods in five cities, the largest collection of policing narratives to date, we analyze patterns in discourse around policing. Our goal in closely analyzing these conversations is to uncover how people who experience state authority in our time through policing characterize democratic governance by mapping citizens’ experiences with and views of the state, how they judge the responsiveness of authorities, and their experience-informed critiques of democracy. Methodologically, we argue that observing through Portals real conversations of ordinary people largely unmediated by the researcher allows us to transcend certain limitations of traditional, survey-based techniques and to study politics in beneficially recursive ways. Theoretically, we demonstrate that Portals participants characterize police as contradictory—everywhere when surveilling people’s everyday activity and nowhere if called upon to respond to serious harm. We call this Janus-faced interaction with the state “distorted responsiveness,” and we demonstrate the organic connection of this characterization of police to our participants’ theorization of their broader relationship with

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the state. We argue that their understandings of their own relationships with the key state institutions in their lives are foundational to developing a fuller understanding of democracy in action. In short, by focusing on how individuals experience citizenship in the city through ordinary experiences with municipal bureaucrats who figure prominently in their lives, we can develop a theory of the state from below.

### **Keywords**

policing, race-class subjugation, qualitative methods, citizenship, political science

### **Introduction**

2014 marked a turning point in the way many Americans viewed policing as an institution in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. On August 9, 2014, unarmed teenager Michael Brown was shot and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, MO, and by December of that same year, video footage of Eric Garner's choking death in Staten Island, NY, blanketed social media and more traditional news outlets. In response to these events, President Obama convened the first national commission in the nation's history devoted to policing (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015), and seven months after Michael Brown's death, the U.S. Department of Justice completed its investigation of the City of Ferguson's police department concluding that nearly every aspect of law enforcement in the city was marked by unconstitutionally discriminatory practices driven by an impoverished municipal tax structure in which police were directed to engage in tactics designed to fill city coffers (U.S. Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and Shaw 2015).

In the years since, scholars have sought to understand and respond to the national conversation regarding racialized policing, the seeming newly discovered—at least to those not regularly subjected to such violence—regularity of police violence against citizens (especially citizens of color), the prevalent practice of using police stops of citizens to balance municipal budgets in a world of declining state and local tax revenues (Gordon and Hayward 2016), and pervasive police engagement of citizens through tactics such as “stop and frisk” often targeted at nonserious or even nonoffenders justified by police executives as necessary to lower crime levels (Fagan et al. 2016; Fagan and Geller 2015). Some research focuses on the psychological dynamics of how people understand the legitimacy of these legal authorities (e.g., Meares 2009; Tyler, Fagan, and Geller 2014), while sociological accounts attend to the ways in which residents of heavily

policed spaces both negotiate and call upon police and how police practices shape communal dynamics and social relationships (e.g., Bell 2016; Brunson 2006, 2007; Rios 2011; Stuart 2016; Tyler, Fagan, and Geller 2014). Another focus of research in this field seeks to explain police motivations and resulting citizen mistrust in terms of racial discord (Weitzer 2017) or legally impermissible race discrimination (Carbado 2015). There have been, however, few systematic analyses of the outlooks, frames, and visions of the groups of people most affected by the police practices institutionalized over the last 30 years, how people reason from their experiences, and how those experiences help construct their political action and thought more broadly (Soss and Weaver 2017).

Thus, two primary questions motivate our article: What discourses do “race-class subjugated communities” draw on, reframe, or contest to “better fit the realities” of their lived experience of street-level bureaucrats and state authority (Soss and Weaver 2017)(Dawson 2001)? How do people in highly policed neighborhoods then come to characterize the broader logic and role of the state?

We explore answers to these questions using a new technology, “Portals,” which allows people in disparate communities to have conversations with one another about policing and incarceration in communities where these forms of state action are concentrated. We analyze patterns in collective political discourses around the police gathered from Portals. Our analysis suggests that those who live in places most marked by crime and the state’s response to crime through criminal justice interventions characterize their relationship with the key institution of government present in their daily lives—the police—as one of *distorted responsiveness*.

The account we offer below is not an ethnography of policed communities (Goffman 2014; Rios 2011; Stuart 2016) or a more general qualitative exploration of heavily policed individuals’ attitudes regarding policing (Brunson 2007; Brunson and Miller 2006; Solis, Portillos, and Brunson 2009). Neither are we seeking to explain contemporary criminal justice practice generally (e.g., Simon 2007) or urban policing (Beckett and Herbert 2010) or a particular kind of police encounter (Epp, Haider-Markel, and Maynard-Moody 2014). Instead, our account builds on Soss and Weaver’s (2017) call to understand citizen interaction with police as political, as constructive of our civic identities, political responses, and thought. In particular, the concept of “distorted responsiveness” provides a more general understanding of the relationship our subjects have with government, importantly affecting their understanding of themselves as citizens (Justice and Meares 2014).

The article unfolds this way: First, we present the paper’s theoretical foundation, arguing that studying governance from the perspective of intensively

policed communities unsettles traditional accounts of a generally beneficent state that registers preferences and responds accordingly. Next, we describe the Portals themselves and posit reasons for seeing them as an important innovation methodologically and substantively. We spell out how we used Portals to engage citizens in civic dialogues about the police. In this section, we describe our sites and our approach. The last section presents a qualitative analysis of data from about 800 transcribed conversations in urban neighborhoods in five cities. Here, we introduce the distorted responsiveness concept and its foundation in a changed policy landscape. This concept not only illuminates how citizens encounter police but also broader insights about the nature of democratic responsiveness.

## Theoretical Foundation and Argument

To understand the significance of our argument, a useful starting place is the typical rendering of democratic governance in the United States, and ways in which it occludes the experience of policed communities, and therefore, citizenship in the city.

Robert Dahl (1971, p. 1), in his canonical treatment, described the democratic ideal as “continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals.” The state must give equal weight to each citizen’s views. Since Dahl wrote, the study of state/citizen relations has reflected this conception of political equality in its central questions, its measurement strategies, and its concern for the health of democracy more broadly. A prominent translation of Dahl’s ideal concerns whether citizens have equal influence in the policies of government, but importantly, not the actions of authorities beyond the legislature. As study after study has shown, the democratic ideal is violated when the preferences of the poor and middle class are only rarely translated into policy outcomes, resulting in a government skewed to the rich (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; J. S. Hacker and Pierson 2010; Winters and Page 2009). Whether government registers the preferences of its citizens and delivers them policy goods, then, has become singularly important in research. As such, most literature on democratic citizenship operates along one dimension: attention or inattention from government, typically its classically liberal face. The result of this tendency is the concern of our study.

Our critique focuses on what the dozens of studies taking the Dahlian approach do not tell us due to three key unstated and interrelated assumptions. One is that the state is generally beneficent, if sometimes aloof. A second assumption follows from the first—more connection to government is always better than less, or, as Dahl said, “an equal *distance* of all citizens to

government” (emphasis added). A third assumption is that political alienation flows from *not being heard* by elected officials rather than from some other state activity. Taken together, democratic inequality is the mere absence of equal voice, responsiveness, and, therefore, influence.

These assumptions have shaped (and confined) research questions and outcome measurement in political science. Researchers have mainly focused on the institutions that are designed to register the people’s legislative will rather than citizen interaction with bureaucrats and other state actors who carry out policy. Following from this focus, scholars have highlighted dependent variables that capture narrow political behaviors such as voting and engagement with elected representatives. An assumption that the state generally is beneficent in its response to citizens can lead to several conclusions about the most pressing threats to democracy. Bartels (2008) and Gilens (2012) worry about the share of citizens in the bottom of the class order who do not have their policy preferences registered in policy outcomes, while Mettler (2011) is concerned about how a “submerged state” method of delivering social provision causes people to overlook the ways in which government does many things to benefit them, harming citizen confidence in government. Hacker and Pierson (2010) argue that institutional arrangements increasingly enable wealthy individuals and groups to have disproportionate influence on achieving their desired policy outcomes. Each of these accounts suggests that the democratic state’s fundamental flaw is that it fails to provide adequate goods and resources to its poorest citizens or that when the government does make provision it does so in ways that citizens do not recognize as government. The accounts neglect, however, the fact that the government “goods” the poorest citizens often do receive are surveillance and punishment.

If we designate beneficent policies the government advances in response to citizens preferences the “first face of government,” then the ways in which the polity has over time expanded and deepened its commitment to regulation, coercion, surveillance, and discipline can be considered government’s “second face” (Soss and Weaver 2017). Our argument is that a full accounting of democratic government must include how citizens experience its second face, so the field’s narrow scholarly attention to preference responsiveness simply will not provide a complete picture of the structure and authority of the American state. As political scientists Jamila Michener (2018) and Joe Soss, Richard Fording, and Sanford Schram (2011) have highlighted in their own work, how authorities in educational, social, labor market, and correctional institutional contexts treat individuals (as suspicious or innocent, as a subject or a principal, as worthy or protection or expendable) must be considered alongside whether representative institutions are equally responsive to

different constituent groups. Focus on this second dimension naturally raises the question of how people conceptualize government as a function of their actual treatment by government bureaucrats.

In this article, we trace one very prominent conception of the nature of state activity flowing from its second face, which we term “distorted responsiveness.” The government actor of concern here is police. Our participants were not focused only upon whether police responded when called for service. Instead, participants in our study experienced authorities as contradictory, both everywhere and nowhere. Police authority was most energetic where it did not matter for their lives—busting people for selling “loose squares” or other minor transgressions. At the same time, these authorities were out of reach and unresponsive when they were “steady dyin.” We show below that our participants’ discourse regarding police and policing directly flowed into more general conception of government, following work in other bureaucratic arenas (Soss 2005). For those who described distorted responsiveness, their conception of government, then, was predicated on this dual position of being abandoned and overseen, unprotected and occupied. They were “up for the taking” and regularly “fleeced” because their racial position made them negligible actors in the political system.

The concept of distorted responsiveness we describe here has echoes in literature in other contexts. In writing of the twinned “abuse of legal power and the withholding of laws to protect Blacks,” Wendy Brown-Scott (1994) has referred to “state lawlessness.” The political scientist Lisa L. Miller (2015) describes Blacks in the United States as living in a “failed state,” experiencing both high levels of unremediated social risk that lead to violence and actual state violence and incarceration. But these authors do not focus on the ways in which specific and cumulative experiences with local authorities and bureaucrats are conceptually important to how people theorize about their own and their community’s relationship to government, sense of standing, and experience of state power. Criminologists, too, have detailed experiences that young people in particular have with “over and under policing,” but that literature does not have as its aim a more general theory of how individuals think about their relationship to the state and instead is most concerned with an understanding of the social organization of communities and neighborhood structure (Brunson 2007; Brunson and Miller 2006; Walker 2000).

Therefore, our aim in this article is to say something about citizenship in the city today through mapping citizens experiences with and views of the state. We argue that the Portals dialogues unsettle literature in American politics by exposing a second dimension, namely, treatment by authorities representing the second face of the state. By listening to the way in which people in real, unstructured conversation with one another theorize government

authority as a means to “keep niggas down where they at in whatever way you can, make ’em mad, get ’em in they feelings” they are not mounting a challenge that “our preferences aren’t registered,” we see they are describing state power and government as it actually occurs and exists in their communities (Weaver, Prowse, and Piston 2019).

If we want to understand governance, state power, civic standing, and freedom in the city, we need to study how local government orients itself toward citizens through everyday police action, to which we turn now.

## What Are Portals?

Portals are immersive, publicly accessible, interconnected environments that give distant people the sense of sharing the same room and give communities the ability to meaningfully link to one another.<sup>1</sup> Gold shipping containers outfitted with audio-visual technology can be placed anywhere—in a neighborhood, in a community institution, in a public square, art gallery, college campus, or county jail. Upon entering the virtual chamber, a participant is connected by life-size video and audio in real time with a complete stranger in an identical gold shipping container in another city or country, creating the illusion of being in the same room with someone who may be, in fact, on the other side of the world. A Portal is designed to be a highly intimate, secure space in which participants can be fully present. Participants are able to read one another’s full body language, to make eye contact, to bond over shared or divergent lived experiences, or to confront difficult political issues in collaboration with each other. They are also a civic and social infrastructure, a physical place to congregate where social cohesion develops and that enable civic encounters (Klinenberg 2018).

In April of 2016, we launched the Criminal Justice Dialogues, placing two Portals installments in our pilot sites: Moody Park in Milwaukee, WI, and Military Park in Newark, NJ. Later that year, we incorporated a new Portal in the Bronzeville/Grand Boulevard area of Chicago, IL, and by mid-2017, a Portal was operating in Lexington Market in Baltimore, MD, in downtown Los Angeles, CA, and Mexico City, Mexico.<sup>2</sup> We collected approximately 866 conversations (approximately 430 hours of deliberation) in 13 neighborhoods within six cities, the most extensive collection of first-hand accounts of the police—by those who are policed—to date.

## Where, Who, and When

We attempted to locate Portals in areas with high concentrations of police-citizen encounters, though there is significant variation in police activity and



the people who entered a Portal across cities, across sites within each city, and even within a single location.<sup>3</sup> For example, we observed conversations between an upwardly mobile working-class Latino student population at California State University Dominguez Hills founded after the Watts riot and residents of Milwaukee's Amani neighborhood located in the 53206 zip code, which has the highest share of incarcerated Black men in America. Portals participants experienced policing approaches that varied from one reformist regime after high-profile scandals (Los Angeles) to one in the midst of oversight by federal government (Baltimore) to two in the midst of a high-profile adjudication and activism after teenagers were killed by police (Chicago and Milwaukee). In addition, the Portals were also moved *within* cities (with the exception of our pilot sites) during the study period to inhabit neighborhoods with very different local histories, levels of police presence, and demographic backgrounds among residents.

Around a single portal, there was dynamism. Consider the Baltimore Portal, which drew in former gang members, budding activists, artists, college students, working class people on their way to work, and sex workers. The Portal was sited in an area that contained a bus stop shuttling residents to all parts of the city, an open-air drug market, a methadone clinic, and a social justice-oriented cooperative and radical bookstore. In Los Angeles, one Portal site sat at the intersection of a housing project, a halfway house, campus, and a community-inspired food market, drawing in second generation immigrants, campus staff, as well as ex-inmates on ankle monitors. Another Portal site in Los Angeles drew in those from a nearby homeless encampment, people passing through on their way to work, and lawyers visiting the law library.

In addition to their location, the Portals captured multiple forms of variation. First, because Portals dialogues involve at least two people in direct conversation with one another, there is variation among the participant pairings themselves. The pairings span generations, race and class position, and gender. Second, Portals capture differences not just in city spaces, but in the *same neighborhood over time*. For example, we observed dialogues in Milwaukee before, in the midst of, and just after the uprising surrounding the police killing of Sylville Smith. We heard conversations between Baltimore residents before and after the gun trace task force corruption case (Baynes 2018). The Portals project thus comprises different city contexts, different neighborhood contexts, different people within those contexts, and different moments and markers within those contexts. Readers should refer to the appendix for further details on each location, dates, and number of conversations that occurred in each site.

## *How It Works*

The process is powerful in its simplicity. Each Portal is staffed by a pair of curators who do outreach, hold events, and describe the study and are paid a living wage. Curators, who were often associated with community-based groups with arts and justice missions, used the Portals for many informal “pop up” initiatives (showing movies to kids on the big screen, a space for art and performance like poetry slams, running a barbershop, holding chess tournaments, having community “shared meals” or town hall discussions with civic leaders, or dialoguing with global Portals that are not a part of our study) on the days and times that conversations were not being recorded for our study. In this way, the curators created the Portal to be a community gathering spot and interesting place for all kinds of discussions and collaborations in addition to discussions of policing. For just one instance, Portals founder Amar Bakshi says “we have people making a rap album in 15 countries, now being produced out of Milwaukee.”

Participants enter the Portal typically after wandering in out of curiosity or word of mouth and engage in an approximately 20-minute conversation with someone else that they do not know (sometimes, there is more than one participant on each side) in a paired city. After participants hear about the study and give consent to participate but prior to beginning a conversation, they fill out an iPad survey consisting of 12 brief questions, including basic demographic background as well as queries about the frequency of interactions with police (age of first contact, how many times stopped by police in their life, and recency of the encounter), trust and confidence in police, and crime victimization. Crucially, as the individuals speak to one another, their conversation is not moderated by a researcher or even guided by traditional research questions posed in a survey. Instead, Portal participants are prompted to discuss their ideas and feelings about police in their community.<sup>4</sup> Once participants enter the Portal container, they are usually alone, except for the person they are speaking to in the other city. Each of the Portal dialogues is video recorded, transcribed, then coded for analysis in Dedoose.

## *Participant Characteristics*

The modal participant had a high school education or attended some college, was Black, male, and young (18–25 years). These characteristics varied somewhat by city (Los Angeles participants, for instance, were more likely to be Latinx and/or have obtained a higher level of education and more women participated in Baltimore and Los Angeles than in the other sites). Conversation

transcripts reveal even more variation; some participants across cities describe having middle class ties, having been incarcerated or currently being justice-involved, and/or having law enforcement in their extended families.

As already noted, our goal was to capture conversations among individuals who have experienced high levels of police contact. And this is borne out by the data—72% reported that they had been stopped by police (not counting minor traffic violations).<sup>5</sup> Almost half of participants in Chicago, Baltimore, and Milwaukee reported that they had been stopped more than seven times in their lives (Figure A1). And strikingly, for many of the Portals participants, contact was quite recent—in both Milwaukee and Chicago at least 30% of respondents said they had an involuntary encounter *in the last week or month* (Figure A2). For additional information on participant and pairing characteristics, please see the appendix.

## Our Approach to the Data

We proceed from the idea that subjugated knowledge offers a vital accounting of the American state and the democratic condition in our time (Cohen 2004; Foucault 1976; hooks 1992; Scott 1990). As we note above, understanding and theorizing government, state action, and state power requires examining its operation in real communities as it actually exists. Thus, we follow the constitutive and “active listening” approaches of scholars like Katherine Cramer (2012), whose “listening investigations” uncovered a “rural consciousness.” Although Cramer’s primary topic differs from ours—she visited local café klatches of working-class Whites in rural Wisconsin while we focused primarily upon dense urban neighborhoods of mostly Black and Brown people—we adopted a similar approach for a similar reason. We believe that listening can yield unmatched insight into political understandings.<sup>6</sup>

Existing large-N surveys are notoriously inadequate at capturing the experiences of highly policed communities. (See Pettit 2012 for an excellent discussion of how modern social and population surveys regularly disappear incarcerated people from their samples.) Mario Small (2008) notes the advantages to scholars of locating traditionally undersampled populations by “finding them through non-random means, such as organizations” or, in our case, by placing a Portal in a highly policed area. In such cases, researchers usefully turn to nonprobability, nonrandom purposive samples.

Like Cramer’s subjects, our Portals participants are not a strictly random sample, and we cannot say how representative they are of communities of interest. We believe the Portals exhibit the virtues of a more ethnographic or qualitative method. The method observes people in their communities and through their own words—what Melissa Harris Perry refers to as “everyday

political talk”—while also demonstrating the powerful insights gained from scale and ecological diversity (Harris-Lacewell 2004). We do not know who elects not to have a conversation after learning about the Portal. We do not know what kind of response rate we achieved or whether we are systematically undersampling introverts, those who are more reticent to discuss their experiences with police, or people who are working during Portals operating hours.

While we cannot systematically assess who we are missing from the communities (and it is not only likely, but certain, that we missed many different kinds of neighborhoods), we believe that not having a representative sampling design is an acceptable tradeoff given that we are after richer data that reveals not just a snapshot of opinion that is “representative,” but how people reason together, how they frame things in their own words and not those of the survey researcher, and how they develop a theory of state action and power. Interpersonal interactions capture aspects of political life that traditional large-N, representative surveys do not (Sanders 1999)—complexity, reasoning, disagreement, and explanations for a given belief. Representativeness or bias would be critical if our study was based on a “sampling logic,” or more specifically, if we were testing hypotheses about the distributions of attitudes (how many) or causal relationships between variables (how related). Our study is more akin to a “case study logic,” “critical when asking *how* and *why* questions, with which a sampling logic has greater difficulty” (Small 2008, p. 6). That said, our focus on narrative will likely enhance and improve survey data collections and resulting studies that do focus on *how many* type questions. Other scholars can use the discursive themes we locate in Portals conversations to conduct their own larger representative surveys to specifically measure what specific proportion of the population thinks X or Y.

In explaining her turn to intensive listening in local groups, Cramer (2016, p. 20, p. 218) puts it this way:

I find mass-sample public opinion surveys enormously helpful for capturing what a large population of people think at a given point in time. But for the task of figuring out why people think what they do I have found no better substitute than listening to them in depth . . . and hearing how they piece the world together for themselves. . . . Poll-based analyses of opinion ought to be accompanied not just by focus groups or in-depth interviews but also by listening methods that expose us to the conversations and contexts of everyday life.

And we agree.

Our approach is an interpretive exercise in hearing how ordinary people who regularly experience policing make sense of the world, how they describe the “rules of engagement” with the state, and how they perceive their communities’

power and position. Through this bottom-up approach, our hope is to identify themes that animate or anchor the conversation, rhetorical strategies and metaphors, distinctions drawn, references to historical touchpoints, and what is commonsense. Once we identify common vocabularies, resonant frames (Woodly 2015), and ideological anchors, we can begin to answer larger questions about oppositional frameworks, systems of thought, and moral discourses within race-class subjugated communities and explore specific variations by gender, race and ethnicity, or city.

So, instead of asking whether people think police are fair or whether they trust police all the time, sometimes, or never—what a survey might ask—instead we ask, “how do they ‘define the limits of the permissible’ of police and residents?” (Dawson 2001, p. 58). Instead of asking whether having a police encounter *causes* a particular attitude or behavior—as those analyzing surveys might do (and typically with some difficulty)—we listen for our participants’ “causal story” of state action in their communities. Instead of trying to measure the number of mentions of topics, or distributions of antipolice attitudes, we seek to explore *how people reason through their experiences*, the ways they frame and do not frame problems pertaining to security from violence. By doing all of this, we can locate the various strands of political discourse and beliefs structured by personal and communal experience with the state.

## Analysis: Citizenship and the City

In this part, we trace how Portals participants’ conversations progress from a particular description of their own experiences or their understandings of how police operate in their communities and neighborhoods. Many participants’ experiences are marked by their perception that police are simultaneously selectively vigilant and negligent, what we term *distorted responsiveness*. We then show how their conversations organically morph into a more general characterization of their relationship with the state. Through their persistent contact with the coercive arm of the state (its second face), participants ascribe a logic to the state’s orientation toward them. In their minds, all community members are “up for the taking”—available for scapegoat, sanction, or financial extraction by the state. Portals conversations illuminate how race-class subjugated citizens characterize both the nature and logic of their citizenship based on their experiences with police. The remainder of this article will define distorted responsiveness and illustrate the ways in which participants’ experiences with police relate to their more general understanding of the state’s orientation toward them.

## Distorted Responsiveness

Across Portals conversations, participants did not describe the police as performing a unified mission aimed at ensuring their security but, rather, as acting simultaneously harmful and unheeding. We characterize their understanding of the dual nature of police activity and its relationship to the community as *distorted responsiveness*, though it was called many things by participants. Despite unique experiences, different places of emphasis, and disagreement about the motivations of police, we witness across Portals conversations, a consistent collective understanding that aggressive and arbitrary patrolling was *yoked* together with invisibility of police or their ambivalence in the face of immediate danger.

Approximately 49% of conversations in this sample described distorted responsiveness when referring to how the police authority was oriented in their communities. Indeed, distorted responsiveness seems to have a broad resonance and expression across communities in our study, across participants, and across conversational pairings, suggesting that it was not a particularistic idea but a broadly accepted and frequently deployed framework for describing policing in urban space. What is striking and gives us confidence that this concept is an important descriptive frame is that we find distorted responsiveness even among participants who disagree about the cause of police violence and/or understand the role of their communities differently. Distorted responsiveness was a prominent motif coursing through conversations that bridged various divides, among participants who said “the police ain’t shit” at one end to those that said “the police do the best they can.” One conversational pairing may associate distorted responsiveness with an extended history of racial subjugation (“White people know, they know what we capable of and they trying to do everything in they power to keep us from doing it”). Another may express primary frustration with community violence, and the police’s failure to prioritize it. The breadth and variation of distorted responsiveness emerge in the analysis of our coding as well. According to our analysis, while this concept was broadly shared, there is some demographic variation that correlates with the expression of distorted responsiveness within these conversational dyads. We provide our systematic coding analysis in the appendix.

Typical Portals conversations describe the police as “doing too much,” “they be like extra,” or they “sweat people about cigarettes.” These terse phrases were followed by extensive elaborations on the disposition of police toward their communities and families. The police were extremely attentive to small infractions and would hound people for minor quibbles. Police were “petty.” Police would require that people show identification and inquire as to

where they were going. And, when police stopped individuals for minor infractions and seemingly innocuous inquiries, they were overly aggressive in their interactions. Notably, Portals participants explained that this energy and attentiveness to their family and friends did not translate into energetic response when people were at risk of violence or predation, or when they had already endured violence. In these critical moments, participants said the police were absent or slow to respond or dismissive, and when they did respond police further victimized them or treated them as criminal suspects. Although participants could easily recognize the duality of police action and describe its pattern, they were also confused by the contradictions inherent in their experience. They wondered aloud why police seemed to be there at a moment's notice to check them for insignificant, technically unlawful things, but withdrawn and reluctant to protect them when actual threats to their person arose. Participants described their communities metaphorically as sometimes being on a tight leash but at other times being in the free fall of abandonment at those key moments in their lives and the lives of those around them when they desperately needed help. Importantly, even those who held more positive views of police and who were sympathetic to the dangers police faced demonstrated an understanding of distorted responsiveness as we describe it below.

In this frame, police are both fast *and* slow, vigilant *and* reticent. It was common for participants to describe the police as being like “Johnny on the spot” when they or a friend were selling a loose cigarette but as nonresponsive or blasé when participants really needed and tried to enlist police help—“it’s gonna be like just callin’ a phone with nobody on the other end, you know.” The juxtaposition of extreme police responses to things like a “10 year old walking across the street” without using a crosswalk or “speed walking” while exhibiting shoulder shrug responses to people being shot in the head was a common feature of conversations. For example, one young Black woman in Chicago started to describe the police to her Portals partner: “Well, the police in Chicago, I feel like they’re real picky, because you can call them for one thing and they take forever to come but if they hear it’s another thing that they rush, and that’s not fair.” Another exchange between two middle-aged Black women in LA and Baltimore analogizes the police as usurping a father’s role, to which her conversation partner elaborates that the fatherly support is distorted—quick to do harm for a stolen car but not able to provide protection and secure us in the face of violence:

You can’t even raise your children properly, you know, with someone else [the police] trying to be their dad. I mean, you’re not even a part of my family. How are you, how are you providing for me? It’s as if they’re giving us family support.

How are you even being supported? I can't even get you to come to my neighborhood if somebody gets shot . . . But for our stolen car, you can. You can do 70 and 80 down a one-way street and all these children playing on it.

Another person, a 21-year-old Black woman in Chicago, revealed succinctly how things work: "In my city, it's more of a they will put you in jail for weed or something little but if somebody gets shot in the head down the street, they can't find who did it. That's how it is here." A 21-year-old Latino in Los Angeles observed:

I grew up in, mostly like, minority groups area community, so I think policing was, like, really heavy . . . And then unfortunately when you did call them for help or like attention, they weren't really as productive when you did.

Others described how police made arbitrary decisions, suddenly having the budget and manpower to police picayune activity and to harass but not to protect: "the police where I live at," one 31-year-old Black woman in Milwaukee noted,

they just take a long time to get there. Like, you can call them for anything. It don't matter what it is. And they be talking like, like they don't got enough force out here to come and help you when you really need them. But they be harassing people who ain't got nothing. Absolutely nothing. Yeah, they do shit when they ready to do it. When it's beneficial to them. They really don't give a fuck about how you is.

Collectively, participants described police spending a lot of time and energy on arresting people for trivial offenses such as drinking out of paper bags but nowhere to be found when there was a chance for police to do something to help the community and out of reach or unconcerned when needed.

For others, memorable personal experiences formed the basis for their perceptions of distorted responsiveness. Take one young Black woman in Milwaukee, who recalls a personal experience being questioned while coming home. Police flashed their lights in her sleeping son's face before questioning her about being out late:

I really don't like the police. Like, they don't respond fast enough when you really need them. They rude as ever, they stop you for no apparent reason at all. Like, they just. . . . I feel like they do too much. . . . Your mission is to serve and protect, but we see you as threats now. Me and my son, we scared to walk down the street. We go home, we shut all the doors, let all the blinds down. We go to bed.



She goes on to say “They worn out they welcome. They’re not even needed. . . . They’re pointless.” And after admitting that her biggest fear is having her 2-year-old son shot by police, she says “I want to be able to take him to a park, or take him swimming and not be no police up there. Because now they everywhere.” Some had had personal experiences with violent victimization and police not responding:

I happened to get a bullet in my spine, which is still there. I haven’t heard anything about anybody being caught or anything. There’s cameras right there on that corner and on the building. (Black Male in Milwaukee, 51 years old)

They come but they don’t never come on time. Like when I had got shot they ain’t really . . . they weren’t too concerned. They came like, it took them like a hour to come. I mean where I got shot at, it wasn’t too serious, but it’s still a fact that a person gets shot and y’all taking all day to come. (Unidentified Chicago participant)

This fifteen year old girl just got shot in her kitchen and she dead. They couldn’t save her. So like you said they don’t come fast. They give you time to die. They give you time to die. You know it be like oh well they probably be deceased by the time we get there. (Black Male in Milwaukee, 57 years old)

These personal experiences were followed by exasperation and confusion; policing logics made very little sense to them and were contradictory and inconsistent. After describing calling the police when his life (a 51-year-old Black man) was threatened and “they never even came,” his conversation partner, an 18-year-old Black woman, blurted out the question: “So who do we call to protect us? The people that’s here to protect us is pumping fear in our hearts, so who do we call when we need . . .” Who was their guardian? That question hung heavy on the conversations. After noting that police “show a lack of regard for the community, but then again we’re supposed to look up to them,” one 55-year-old Black woman admitted being confused: “I don’t know what they want us to do, or how they want us to feel.” For some participants, the experience of distorted responsiveness lead to the conclusion that police protection was a hoax. Several mocked a common motto of police—“Protect and Serve.”

This conversation between a 64-year-old Black man in Los Angeles and a 48-year-old white man in Baltimore describes a game to measure how non-responsive police were to gun violence, and their resulting interpretation that some areas get more responsiveness than others. Notably, these Portals participants disagreed about virtually every other topic that arose—particularly the Rodney King shooting—but shared a common description for why police

did not respond to gunshots and the perverse reality that the highest crime areas had the least protection:

Los Angeles man: . . . in the early 1990s, I lived in Venice and Crenshaw, which was not a good area back then. I used to listen to, to gun fire at night, with my friend. . . . We used to sit out on the balcony trying to figure out whether it was a 9 millimeter, a 38, an AK-47. . . . And we used to time them, time they're roll out, and how long it took, took to, to get to the, the crime, to the gunshots, and it was average 15 minutes to half an hour. . . . And that just does not make sense, you know what I mean? You got a police station which is, is several blocks away from gunshots, occurring all the time . . .

Baltimore man: Because they're not, they don't care about Watts and Crenshaw. They worry about Downtown.

Los Angeles man: Right, where the money is.

[A lengthy discussion on why there are no cameras in those areas but there are in downtown ensues.]

Baltimore man: But they don't care! But, but, if there's a community that is predominantly European with trickles of Black in it, working class, they do have those cameras.

Los Angeles man: Yeah.

Baltimore man: They, they do. Protecting them. . . . You ask me, "Well, why do you want to move out?" Because I don't have any protection! I want my kids to go and play also. I don't want to abandon my area.

Los Angeles man: You want your kids to go to a good school, to be able to go to a park unmolested, to have real estate prices go up.

Baltimore man: To have the American Dream. And you cannot have that with drug dealers on the streets, prostitutes, murder, gunfire at night, um, that's just my point of view.

In some ways, the discourse we have observed thus far reflects longstanding ideas detailing the ways in which Black Americans have suffered unequal protection of the criminal law while being subject to unequal enforcement of it. Historically, both Randall Kennedy (1998) and William Stuntz (2011) document state failure to protect enslaved people from murder and assault, often by Whites, during the antebellum period. In particular, they cite the failure of the U.S. Supreme Court during Reconstruction to interpret the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to allow the federal government to intervene against states whose governments were overcome by privately run terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan that led massacres of newly empowered African-American officials and constituencies in the South.

Focusing their attention primarily on analyses of the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment, both authors extend their analysis of the state's failure across all components of the criminal justice apparatus to take seriously victimization of Blacks well into the twentieth century. In addition to analyses of constitutional law, the literature reveals a concern with and accounting of the ways in which municipal government and criminal justice system actors seemingly ignored or paid differential attention to Black victims of crime as the U.S. crime rate began to soar between the late 1960s and through the 1990s (Carter 1987; A. Hacker 1995; Kennedy 1993; Sampson and Wilson 1995). More recently, researchers have trained their attention on the federal (and state) War on Drugs to make pointed arguments about the under-enforcement of criminal law in response to violence related to illegal drug selling in cities (Forman 2017; Fortner 2015; Tonry 1995).

With respect to unequal and punitive enforcement of Black Americans, the literature is very extensive, ranging again from the antebellum period (e.g., Kennedy 1998; Oshinsky 1996; Stroud 1827) through the Jim Crow period and the tumultuous Black freedom struggle during the 1960s (e.g., Baldwin 1966; Berrey 2015; Chafe, Gavins, and Korsted 2011; Muhammad 2010; Walker 2000). Extensive research explores the existence of harsher criminal penalties for Blacks as compared with Whites in criminal statutes for the same conduct; documents empirically the fact that Blacks received longer prison sentences than Whites for similar conduct; shows that once incarcerated, Blacks often were subject to much harsher prison conditions than Whites; and demonstrates that policing on the streets was targeted more at Black Americans than Whites.

Collectively, these accounts sometimes are referred to as "unequal protection and unequal enforcement" as a way to describe how the state, or law enforcement agencies, failed to protect Black Americans from criminal victimization while also subjecting them to harsh punishment and oversight. The discourse of distorted responsiveness our participants describe is clearly related to this older characterization of the over and under protection of the criminal legal system in the literature, but our participants' discourse has emerged in a new policy landscape. This observation is critical to our argument here. A new form of policing has emerged over the last 30 years in response to a national concern about rising crime rates and shaped by the politics of race (Weaver 2007).

Policing today is purportedly justified as a project of crime reduction. Indeed, crime reduction is often touted as the primary reason for police, but this orientation is relatively new. Well into the 1980s, neither scholars nor police executives considered crime reduction through policing to be of paramount importance or even possible (e.g., Bayley 1994; Manning 1977).

Today, however, it is commonplace for both policing agencies and the public they serve to argue that bringing crime rates down is a critical function of the police role. This change is due to a confluence of at least four factors, resulting in an explosion in the size of the state's coercive, surveillant face. First, the rise of the idea of accountable bureaucracies has provided the demand for policing agencies to attempt to demonstrate a connection between their activity and a goal the public deems important—crime reduction—as opposed to simply detailing quantity of action they perform as was done in the past (Moe 1984; Wilson 1989). Second, advances in statistics since the 1990s now allow social scientists to demonstrate a relationship between police on the street and changes in crime without being hampered by endogeneity problems (Braga and Weisburd 2010; Di Tella and Schargrodsky 2004; Klick and Tabarrok 2005), so police executives can and do seek to legitimize their crime control strategies through empirical accounts of the relationship between police manpower and tactics and drops in crime. Third, a policy mechanism, “Broken Windows” policing, that promotes the use of proactive police engagement with individuals on the basis of low-level offenses for the purpose of preventing more serious crime became popular among police executives suddenly held accountable by their bosses—mayors—for crime reduction (Bellin 2014). Broken windows policing strategies, together with a data-driven management mechanism called COMPSTAT, has driven proactive policing (Fagan et al. 2016; Meares 2015). Fourth, police agencies received a massive influx of federal resources beginning in the 1970s that have vastly expanded the size of police forces (Hinton 2016; Weaver 2007), which allowed them to devote more resources to the “cops on dots” approach COMPSTAT management techniques promote. Proactive policing also has been bolstered by the proliferation of low-level criminal laws enacted by state and local legislative bodies, which both authorize and invite police to make contact with Americans for virtually any or no reason at all. Michael Brown of Ferguson was violating a “manner of walking” law, a law making a crime out of gait.

Portals conversations reflect the contemporary reality of policing we describe above that promotes crime reduction through strategies aimed at policing low-level offenses (Braga, Welsh, and Schnell 2015). Our participants describe these newer practices in the form of hyper attentiveness to small offenses. At the same time, the participants discuss the failure of police to come when they are really needed because, at least in their understanding, they are obsessed with petty jaywalking.

Constitutional law might have provided a backstop to the rise and subsequent consequences of this shift in policing toward high volume stops and order-maintenance policing, but the courts through their interpretations of the

4th Amendment have instead provided lax oversight police on the street (Harris 1993; Maclin 1998, 2011). Indeed, constitutional law itself reflects a dynamic of distorted responsiveness. Few cases provide constitutional limits on police determinations of reasonable suspicion that an individual is involved in criminal activity, a constitutional requirement for a police officer to justify restricting a person's autonomy, in situations in which an officer has engaged a person who is Black and present in a "high crime area." At the same time, courts have refused to mandate that the state act to protect people in serious jeopardy who have called on the state to help them. The United State Supreme Court famously ruled in *DeShaney v Winnebago County* (1989) that the Due Process Clause of the 14th Amendment does not mandate as a substantive matter an affirmative duty of the state to protect its citizens from private violence. In *DeShaney*, the Winnebago County's Child Protective Services was aware that four-year-old Joshua's father regularly beat him, so when Joshua ultimately was beaten so severely he suffered massive brain damage and was institutionalized, his family sued claiming the state had a duty to protect him and intervene. The Supreme Court disagreed, and this decision was reiterated five years later in *Town of Castle Rock v. Gonzales* when the Court found no Due Process violation and therefore no suit under Section 1983 for a woman who sought to sue the state for the failure of police to enforce a temporary restraining order (TRO) against her husband who violated the TRO, kidnapped her children, and ultimately killed them.

Like Joshua DeShaney, Portals participants discussed situations in which they were ignored or victimized in seeking police protection. The juxtaposition of suffocating police attention to paltry offenses stood in stark contrast to participants' accounts of deafening silence in situations of serious need. Not being heard, not being cared for when you are a victim, not being taken seriously is a form of nonresponsiveness and disregard. It is painful in its own right. But being treated harshly *in conjunction with perceived abandonment* is what we mean by distorted responsiveness. What does it mean to not be heard but to be crushed on a lark? To not be defended one day but targeted the next? Watched over and sanctioned for slights while their real wound went unresolved? Does it give rise to a certain kind of citizenship in race-class subjugated communities? In the next section, we begin to engage these questions by demonstrating how distorted responsiveness does not stop with the police; rather, it is the foundation to how race-class subjugated communities characterize their relationship to state authority more generally. We suggest that this bottom-up theorization of democratic responsiveness runs counter to the dichotomous framework most commonly engaged in the literature—that either the state registers your preferences and gives you resources, or it does not.

## **“It Ain’t Just the Police, It’s the Entire System”: The Police as an Analogy for State Treatment**

In this section, we show how Portals participants link their experience with police and their understandings of the basis of police action to a more general understanding of the state’s orientation to them and their communities. To participants, their experience with policing provides an allegory for their expectations with respect to the state’s response to them more generally. The state usually will not register their pleas; it will instead prescribe surveillance, and presumes culpability. Racial power foregrounds participants’ understanding of state treatment. Many participants speculate that White and/or monied communities do not experience this dynamic—in particular when residents of those communities experience the same problems our participants discussed. It was their sense that the state responded to other communities in a more effective and benevolent fashion.

Thus far, we have highlighted only conversation excerpts, and while revelatory and exemplary of our thesis, they do not fully capture how dialogue organically flows (without prompting) from how people describe the nature of policing to how they characterize the logic of those experiences, to a more general understanding of the state’s orientation to them. To illustrate, we have selected one conversation in its near entirety to model the process by which state theorizations emerge in conversation.<sup>7</sup>

This is a conversation between an 18-year-old Black young man from Milwaukee in his last year of high school who aspires to attend the military and a 55-year-old Black mother from Baltimore who fears for the fate of her 15-year-old son. The Milwaukee participant reports having been stopped by police more than seven times. He describes how he hates the police because they will stop you “just like that” if your skin is of a darker hue. The Baltimore woman believes it is only a matter of time before her son has a negative encounter with the Baltimore Police Department (BPD). She worries that the police will “pull him up”—a striking phrase that seems to imply the myriad ways the criminal justice system will whisk his life into a tragic direction. She then begins to describe her own experience with police treatment as one of distorted responsiveness, illustrated by a historic shift in her own life-course in practices and characterized by excessive vigilance and unprotection. Although she engaged in unlawful drugs in her youth, she admits, she received limited attention from the police back then. She then notes a change in way police began to treat her as she entered her late 30s, where she says she began getting pulled over with alarming frequency for no reason. She argues that Martin O’Malley (former governor of Maryland from 2007 to 2015) engaged in a policy of “arresting Black people just because they were

Black.” And then she alludes to a flagrant instance of unprotection amidst rabid police intervention in the community in describing how the Baltimore police raped a woman who called for help:

Milwaukee man: I said, I hate the police because I think it’s wrong that they treat us like this because of the color of our skin. Like, you can get pulled over just like that because you walking around at night and you our skin color.

Baltimore woman: I mean, that’s here, I think that’s everywhere. But my thing about it, if they not doing anything—if no one doing anything wrong, why do they pull you up? That’s what I don’t get and that’s what I don’t like. Now, my son, he look like he’s your age but he’s only 15 and I know it’s just a matter of time before the police pull him up and I’m so afraid that he’s going to get killed by mistake, you see what I’m saying? Cause they just . . . they shoot first and then ask questions later here.

Milwaukee man: Right.

Baltimore woman: I’ll put it this way: when I was your age, no problem with the police—I was smoking weed, doing everything that was against the law—when I got like 30, after I had kids—I had seven kids by the time I was in my early 20’s—I been pulled over by the police, never had a record. By the time I hit 38—I think around 38—we had a certain governor . . . I don’t know if he was a senator, his name was O’Malley, he was actually just arresting Black people just because they were Black. Some of the police, they had to meet a quota. So, for the first time in my life, when I turned 38, they all had [inaudible] because of that. I didn’t have a record but I got arrested like . . . on a weekly basis, I was getting arrested. One police pulled me over for, um, prostitution. I was like, are you serious? And then when they found out I didn’t have a record, then they gave me some other bogus bullshit charge, a drug charge or something. So, I . . . I can relate to where you’re coming from as a Black male but as a Black female, they say, um, one police here raped a girl in her home because she wanted help. Did you hear about that?

Milwaukee man: Yeah, uh, I heard about, like, when I was on Facebook . . . I think I heard something something like that cause when I clicked on it, it said something similar to that.

Baltimore woman: Yeah. She, um, it was on the news, I think on Facebook too. Well, she was from here and she asked—you know, her daughter was missing. Cause her daughter was missing, she called the police,

White guy came and raped her. I mean, he tried to rape her and she called for help, that's the last thing you expect police to do.

Milwaukee man: Right.

Baltimore woman: Especially if you need they help.

The Milwaukee participant then proposes a broader theory of the state. It is here that police become a rhetorical stand-in for White authority. Black people are policed this way "because they scared of us," he says, and then makes the rhetorical switch: "White people know . . . they know what we capable of and they trying to do everything in they power to keep us from doing it." The Baltimore participant concurs by situating the treatment of Black lives in the context of history: White fear of difference is embedded in the nation's fabric. She continues that Black people receive this treatment so "they can and try to make themselves look right about things" despite knowing that Black people are "the most loving people there are." At this point, whether participants are referring to police or White racial power becomes indistinguishable:

Milwaukee man: But I think . . . I think it's just, I think it's just that, I think, with the police, I think they pull us over because they scared of us.

Baltimore woman: They do. The one.

Milwaukee man: Not physically, I'm talking about mentally. Like, cause I know, I know that White people know . . . they know what we capable of and they trying to do everything in they power to keep us from doing it.

Baltimore woman: Right, I agree with you. if you look at history since the United States became independent, White people always been scared of anything different; not just Black people but anything different from them. So, it's not like we're the only ones that—the Indians was like that. They [inaudible] like that. But as Black people, we're the only ones lasting, still out in this country. So, I feel as though they just really trying to bring us down as far as they can and try to make themselves look right about things.

Milwaukee man: Right.

Baltimore woman: Because, naturally, we are the most loving people there are. That's . . .

Milwaukee man: We populate—we got the most population on Earth.

Baltimore woman: Right, that's where, that's where life began, with us.

Milwaukee man: Right.



Following their critique of state authority and their redefinition of their community as “loving people,” they return again to police and briefly consider whether police treatment of Black people can be halted. The conversation concludes on a hopeless note. In the absence of “a very powerful voice” which has yet to come, they are bereft of solutions. The Baltimore woman concludes with some pragmatic and maternal advice to her partner.

Baltimore woman: But . . . bad police need to stop. You have any ideas that might help them stop, any ideas that you can give them?

... That might help the police stop doing what they doing.

Milwaukee man: I think it's going to take a very powerful voice to do that, but until then, no.

Baltimore woman: Ain't nobody done did it.

Milwaukee man: I know.

Baltimore woman: All I can do is ask you as a Black man, just stay out of trouble, keep going to school, and do what you do—everything right and they can't touch you. [inaudible], my brother.

This conversation demonstrates a process by which participants move from particular experiences with state actors (such as police) to an understanding of those experiences in terms of the logic of government action and how that in turn shapes one's civic agency. First, participants agree that police treatment is distorted; that despite the plethoric presence of police in their lives, they fail to protect. From here, their conversation models how for highly policed communities, police are proxies for state logics. They believe that White fear of Black excellence and morality motivates police conduct. It is in this moment that they begin to conflate police with White political authority, first with the governor, and later, to the Founding Fathers. To them, the logic is simple: the state continues to render Black life expendable to protect White righteousness and power. The conversation concludes with dejection, where neither participant can imagine a solution. Their conclusion is unsurprising given their framework. The framework specifies that government responses are filtered through a White authority structure, so when political preferences are registered by government, they will be attended to only in a way that affirms that structure.

Despite the features that make this dialogue unique—its intergenerational and cross-gender dynamic and the personal stories articulated—its pattern is similar to many others that took place in the Portal. Across conversations, police are an entry point for discussions of state treatment more generally. Even participants that made no mention of distorted responsiveness policing but lived in or around highly policed communities saw police as formative

for their sense of civic standing. For example, one prevalent theme in the dialogues was participants' assertion that they were "up for the taking" by police. This idea came out in various ways, but nouns like revenue, profit, tax-collectors, or verbs like seizing and profiting often animated the conversations. Participants spoke of being "fleeced," and they wondered aloud why their communities had to pay for being disrespected. Their neighborhoods and families were used to "collect a dime for the city and the government," and they were "nothing but a check":

You Black man and you young, they don't care about you . . . ya dig? They want to keep you behind the walls so they can get paid. See they get paid from you good money, man, you know good money. That's how they sending they kids to college and all that stuff man. Buying houses and Mercedes Benz, you know. See, we can't have that, they don't want us to have it, so they kill us, they kill up all our Blacks. (53-year-old Black man, Chicago)

It's funny because the police, we're nothing but a check to them. When we do stuff bad, we get sent to jail and they get a paycheck while we just sit in there. None of that money is going to us, they just a paycheck for it. (19-year-old Black man, Milwaukee)

Peace is not attractive to them, because it does not make them any money. They do not make money off peace, they make money off chaos. (19-year-old Black man, Milwaukee)

We're being locked up and held at a ransom. I call that a ransom, not a bail because this is a system that's created for the rich to get richer, you understand what I'm saying? We're not the rich. . . . I feel as though that system is created, why? To generate more money for, for commissaries, for my family to spend more money on commissary food and other families for other inmates who are in there . . . I have a four-year-old son. I don't wish to spend my money on commissaries. I don't wish [to pay] lawyer's fees, and court fees, and pawns, and things like that. No, I want to give this money to my son. (19-year-old Black man, Newark)

Police had broad warrants to approach them, demand from them, humiliate them, fleece them, or assault them. In their formulations, displacement, bodily harm, financial seizure, and arbitrary stops were easily accomplished precisely because their value to the city or before society was not recognized, so that police were perceived as having incredible power on one side of the relationship—"the police is always gonna be able to do what they wanna do." Or, as another person put it: "[Police are] a legalized gang on their own. They can do whatever they want to. Get you out the way if they want to and then

nobody will never find out.” Participants projected understandings that they were not in a position—by their residence in the “pure ghetto,” or because of not “knowing any White people,” or because they “looked like a thug”—to contest police action. In theoretical terms, police could elide the written rules that would ordinarily constrain their actions, the “overt curriculum” (Justice and Meares 2014), because they were dealing with members of a group that was not seen as having clout or significance. As one person remarked “You know, Black already means nothing to America at the end of the day . . .”

A second and closely related theme in the conversations is a widespread consensus that the state selectively responds, using race, place, and wealth as a discretionary lens. One of the Chicago participants in a distinction regularly drawn between the North and South Sides said,

y'all understand the issues that we deal with when it comes to the South Side; ain't nobody pulling anybody over the same way they are on the North Side where all the White folks are. And I said to them [the police who stopped him], we're the ones that don't have the liquid and the capital to be able to pay for all of this, so that don't even make sense to me.

Participants also spoke of their sense that White kids received public health resources for addiction to opioids while their children were imprisoned for possessing or selling crack cocaine. In Baltimore, for example, heroin addiction has been serious problem for the city since at least the 1970s, and participants described with disgust how assistance, treatment, and basic concern were withheld from Black communities. The crisis was addressed by sending Black people in Baltimore to prisons. A Baltimore resident describes his understanding of the state's response:

But now it moved out to the White community. . . . If your child is an addict, it will be no harm, go to the nearest fire department, and they will help you. Excuse me, fifteen years ago, you didn't say nothing about that . . . in Maryland, they have Prince George's County, one of the richest, PG County, Potomac, Bethesda, Annapolis, now it's out there, and it's, “Oh my God! My kids are opium, they do, they've been stealing my stuff from the cabinet!” Um, oh, oh. “I'm one too! I been taking it also! Now I'm addicted!” Well, who's going to help you? Da-na-na! We're going to help you. The government's going to give you money for it.

Well, 15 years ago, in the Black community, we came to you for money. You said, “It's a epidemic. Um, we'll see what we can do.” Long as it's here, it's okay, but when it get out there to your children, oh no! To your schools? Oh no! And how did it get there? Those same kids came into the city. No, we go out

there, we get arrested. You know that. We out of place. They come to the city, they got carte blanche. . . . everything gets taken care of it when it hits the money community.

As we have seen, when mapping citizenship in the city based on how citizens narrate their experiences and views of the state, we can no longer view democratic governance along a singular dimension—whether it is responsive or unresponsive. It is true that our participants point to ways in which the state does not regularly respond to their needs with policies that coincide with their preferences, but to describe this state of affairs simply as a *lack* of responsiveness when the state is actively responsive and even violent in their lives while simultaneously absent in situations of great need holds up an image of government that bears no resemblance to their lived reality. If we want to understand governance, power, civic standing, and freedom in the city, we need to conceive of government differently, and this scholarly enterprise should include government treatment, not just government responsiveness to mass preferences.

## Conclusion

The Portals dialogues lend insight into how highly policed communities experience and theorize the state from below. Through Portals, strangers engaged in unscripted conversations with each other about an institution that for many Americans, and certainly for Portals participants, is a central representative of the state (Forman 2017). While scholars have usefully connected accounts of negative experiences of police to pervasive distrust of this institution (e.g., Monica Bell 2016), few have discussed how police experiences are formative of citizenship (Lerman and Weaver 2014; R. J. Miller and Stuart 2017). We demonstrate that the collective experience of police in race-class subjugated communities are marked by what we call distorted responsiveness in which police are pervasively and menacingly active with respect to activities and contexts that do not to our participants appear to redound to their safety at all and yet absent and unheeding in the kinds of situations anyone would think police would be available to “protect and serve.” We then show how ordinary citizens of the city theorize more generally in their own words and on their own terms about how the state views them and thus their own citizenship based on their interactions with the state’s second face. Our article provides, we believe, a more realistic picture of political authority and lived citizenship in the city by including the experiences of people in race-class subjugated communities.

What we attend to less in this article is the extent to which Portals participants’ theories of the state incite particular political responses. How, for

instance, do participants seek to build power in the face of police interventions characterized by distorted responsiveness? In a related project that uses Portals dialogues, we find that persistent interaction with the second face of state leads individuals to retreat from public life (“Right now, what I’m doing out here in the streets of Chicago, little bro, is staying to myself . . . doing what I gotta do to survive in these streets as a Black man”), repudiate the state (“stop believing in their paperwork”), and aspire for what we describe as *collective autonomy* (“time for us to just come together as a united group”). Accounting for how the second face of the state affects expressions of civic agency further complicates the conception of the responsive/unresponsive state. When surveillance is the only form of state responsiveness one’s community receives, it should be no surprise that one would cease to engage their government or that they would aspire for alternatives that garnered them the dignity the state seems to systematically deny.

Ignoring experiences citizens have with local bureaucrats and state actors such as police in scholarship about democratic life both creates and reinforces a lopsided methodological approach and in turn, a lopsided scholarly imagination of American government. The standard account envisions a world in which everyone wants more and tighter connections to government, so scholars focus on ways to bring government more fully into the lives of citizens and citizens voices more fully into the halls of power. But attention to the “second face” of government reveals that concern about equal distance of citizens from government does not capture the *quality* of treatment a citizen receives from the state even in the imagined context of equal policy response. If the government’s purported response to citizens’ concern about crime, for example, results in constant coercive regulatory discipline from state actors that its recipients cannot translate as delivering any reasonable conception of public safety, then what does it mean to say that government is responsive?

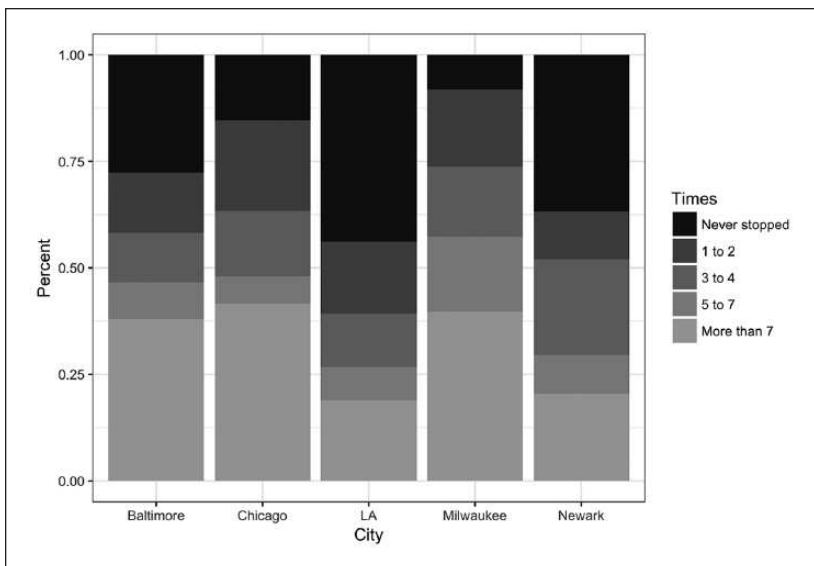
Appendix

*A Portal (from the Inside and Outside)*



*Participant Characteristics*

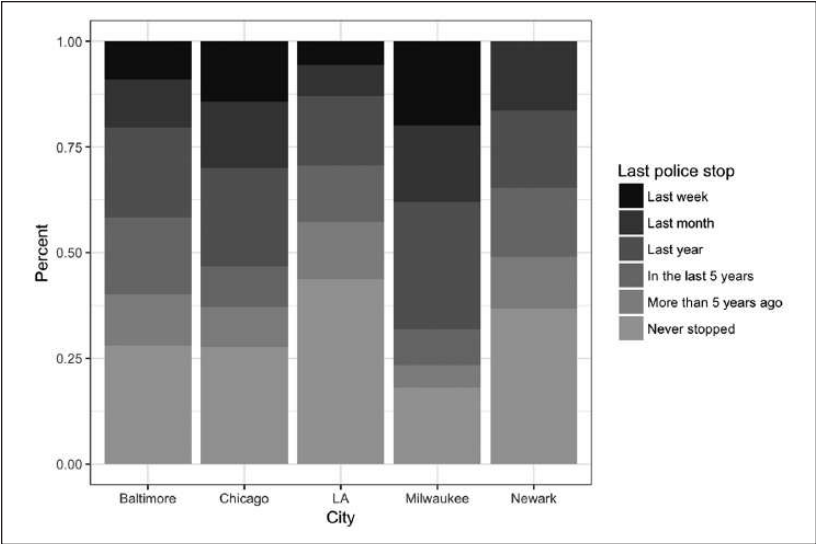
Portals participants gave information about their demographic background, experiences with and trust in police, and victimization on a short iPad survey. Based on this information, the sample was 58.7% Black, 19%



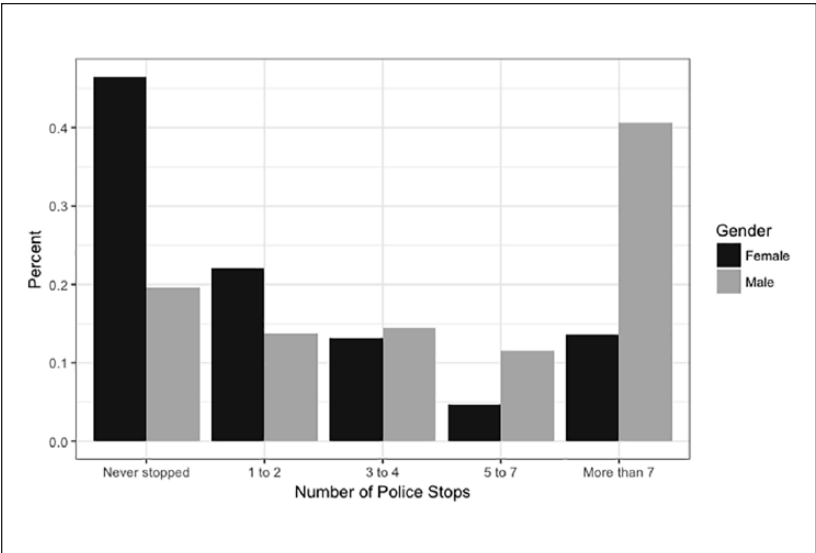
**Figure A1.** How many times have you been stopped by the police in your lifetime?

Multi-racial or Other, 13.9% White, 3.1% Asian American, and 2% Native American or Pacific Islander. 20.8% of participants identified as Hispanic or Latino. The modal participant had a high school education or attended some college, was male, and young. Close to half of the sample (39%) reported having a high school education or less and 32% reported having at least a Bachelor's degree. In total, 43% were below age 30, and 15% were 18 years old. These characteristics varied somewhat by city; most of our Latino participants are in Los Angeles, participants in Milwaukee and Chicago are younger, and a larger share of participants were female in Newark. Los Angeles drew a more educated sample: only 14% had a high school education or less in that city compared with 69% in Milwaukee, 61% in Chicago, and 54% in Baltimore.

Each conversation paired at least two individuals who often did not share demographic characteristics. For example, a conversation may have taken place between an older Black man in Chicago and a Latina in Los Angeles or between a White young Baltimorean with an older Black woman in Milwaukee (Table A1–A3). Many conversations were cross generational.

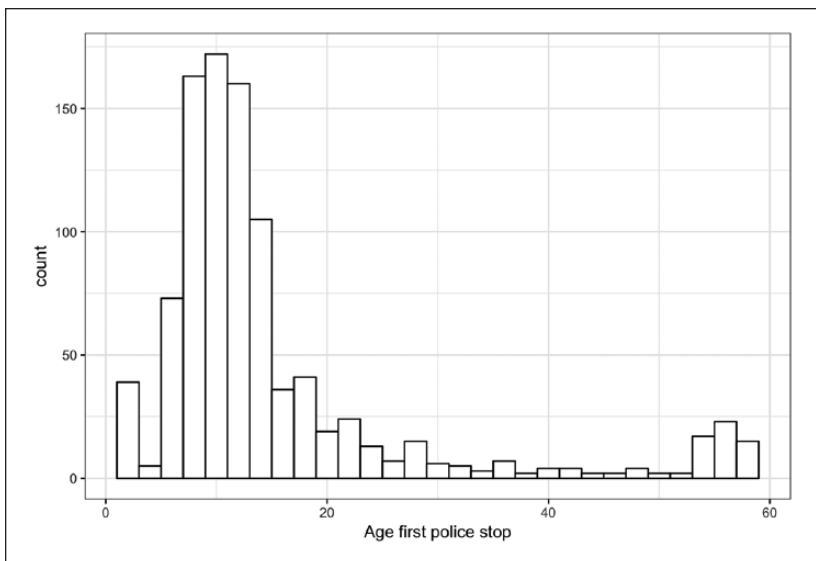


**Figure A2.** When was the last time you were stopped by the police?



**Figure A3.** Police stops in one's lifetime by gender.





**Figure A4.** Age of first police stop among those stopped by police.

As already noted, police contact was frequent, recent, and occurred at an early age (Figure A1-A2). Indeed, 19.8% of all participants in Milwaukee reported that they had been stopped in the last week. Not surprisingly, women had fewer involuntary contacts with police—46% had never been stopped compared with over half of men who had been stopped five or more times in their lives (Figure A3). Women also had less recent contact; 33% of male participants had been stopped in the last month or week compared with one-tenth of women. Although we did not ask them specifically, many revealed in conversations that they had been incarcerated or had a felony conviction.

Lerman and Weaver (2014) documented in their study of “custodial citizenship” that many respondents had experienced their first contact with police at an early age, some as young as 12 years, and they note that the median age of first arrest as indicated in a national representative sample of state and federal inmates is 17 years. The majority of Portals participants were early in adolescence (median age 12) when they had first encounter being stopped, patted down, or sat in handcuffs (Figure A4), a striking finding given that our participants were not necessarily incarcerated as were Lerman and Weaver’s.

## Conversation Pairings

**Table A1.** Conversation Pairings by City.

City_a	City_b	Count
	Los Angeles	18
Baltimore	Los Angeles	327
Chicago		9
Chicago	Baltimore	50
Chicago	Los Angeles	43
Mexico City	Los Angeles	57
Milwaukee		13
Milwaukee	Baltimore	51
Milwaukee	Chicago	114
Milwaukee	Los Angeles	30

Note. Cities with no pair have missing survey data.

**Table A2.** Conversation Pairings by Race.

Race of person 1	Race of person 2	Count
	Black/African-American	20
	Other	10
Black/African-American		29
Black/African-American	Asian/Asian-American	21
Black/African-American	Black/African-American	233
Black/African-American	Multiracial	44
Black/African-American	Native American or Pacific Islander	13
Black/African-American	Other	126
Black/African-American	White	79
Multiracial	Other	25
Multiracial	White	15
Other	White	73
Other	Other	21
White	White	19

Note. Participants with no pair have missing survey data.

**Table A3.** Conversation Pairings by Hispanic/Latino.

hispl_pair	count
N	59
NN	409
NY	243
Y	19
YY	53

Note. N refers to those who do not identify as Hispanic or Latino, while Y refers to those who do. Participants with no pair have missing survey data.

**Table A4.** Portals Location Pairs.

Location_a	Location_b	Count
Centro de Cultura Digital	California State University Dominguez Hills	11
Centro de Cultura Digital	Law Library	65
COA Goldin	Harold Washington	47
COA Goldin	Lexington Market	50
COA Goldin	South Chicago Christian Center	81
Community Center	Law Library	27
California State University Dominguez Hills	Instituto	11
California State University Dominguez Hills	Ynot	61
Instituto	Ynot	30
Law Library	Lexington Market	31
LetUsBreathe	Ynot	19
Lexington Market	Law Library	64
Mercado	Centro de Cultura Digital	15
Mercado	LetUsBreathe	26
Mercado	Ynot	157
Ynot	California State University Dominguez Hills	19

Note. Locations with no pairs have missing survey data.

### *Distorted Responsiveness*

To better understand the prevalence of distorted responsiveness and its patterning across dialogues, we coded for its occurrence in the full set of conversations that took place between September 2016 and December 2017,

excluding conversations with Mexico City. This coded set includes 377 conversations from 10 sites across Milwaukee, Chicago, Baltimore, and Los Angeles—approximately 44% of our sample. While our coding does not include conversations that took place in 2018 near the end of our data collection nor the conversations in Newark during the pilot phase, it covers all cities and 10 of our 13 Portal sites, has conversational pairings that reflect the overall data collection, and captures the various ways distorted responsiveness frameworks played out in conversations.

We coded for distorted responsiveness (0, 1) when participants characterized themselves and/or their communities as simultaneously policed for minor or no transgressions, dealt with in overly aggressive ways during such encounters, and having police protection withheld, slow, or out of reach when it was sought using the frameworks described. Approximately 49% of conversations in this sample described distorted responsiveness when referring to how the police authority was oriented in their communities. Sometimes, the expression of distorted responsiveness referred to a single experience, as in this example of a hypothetical victim desiring police assistance and receiving instead harsh treatment: “some people break in your house, they ain’t going to come. They do come, shit, they fucking lock you up.” In other conversations that expressed distorted responsiveness, the description could occur at separate moments during the exchange; for example, discussion of police nonresponsiveness to victimization could take place during an early part of the conversation, while discussion of overly penetrating and unwarranted enforcement could occur later in the conversation.

Indeed, distorted responsiveness seems to have a broad resonance and expression across communities in our study, across participants, and across conversational pairings. Take this exchange below between two Black men in Chicago and Milwaukee:

Chicago man: It’s way better shit for them to be out here doing. There’s motherfuckers out here shooting and all that shit; killing motherfuckers, raping motherfuckers, and shit.

Milwaukee man: Right and then they still end up getting away with it though.

Chicago man: Right. And they ass not even investigating they ass.

The breadth and variation of distorted responsiveness emerge in the analysis of our coding as well. According to our analysis, there is limited demographic variation that correlates with distorted responsiveness within these conversational dyads but there are patterns worth noting. First, a participant’s race tracks with patterns of distorted responsiveness. Pairings where one or both

participants are Black are more likely to describe distorted responsiveness than not; this stands in contrast to conversations where one or both partners identify as Multiracial, White, or another race/ethnicity. Second, though gender correlates little with distorted responsiveness, male-to-male pairings do exhibit fewer mentions of it than male-to-female and female-to-female pairings. This pattern may allude to two related explanations. First, women in race-class-subjugated communities are more likely to call the police than men, increasing the chances that they experience both overpolicing and underprotection (Bell 2016; Schaible and Hughes 2012). Second, Black men in our sample are more likely to describe repeated patterns of police harassment and are less likely to pursue police as a means of protection.

Place is also a marker of distorted responsiveness in the dialogues. Conversations that include participants from Milwaukee or Chicago are more likely to discuss distorted responsiveness, whereas conversations that include Los Angeles are less likely to do so and conversations with Baltimore do not exhibit a particular pattern. We suspect the relationship between race and place (i.e., segregation) can help explain these patterns. Specifically, Portals in Chicago and Milwaukee were located in majority-Black, underresourced, and segregated communities. The Los Angeles Portal rotated through a downtown, a (majority-minority) university, and a commercial district in a low-income neighborhood on the border of another university. The Baltimore Portal was also located in an area downtown and then later in a gentrifying neighborhood. The latter two locations contained a higher sample of Hispanic/Latinx and White and/or more highly educated participants.

In fact, many participants describe in detail the way race and location predict the type of policing they receive. One participant in Chicago describes to their partner in Milwaukee,

Cause of just the way how they, like, just treat Black people; they pull up on us, like—I don't think I ever seen a White person get pulled up on like that or something like that . . . Like, there's really not no White people in our neighborhood but in the White neighborhoods, I bet it's not like that.

Another participant in Los Angeles currently attending college in California State University Dominguez Hills describes differences in race, place, and policing regimes causally: "I grew up in, uh, mostly, like, minority groups area community, so I think policing was, like, really heavy."

The intersection between race and location comes up in a dialogue between a Los Angeles and Baltimore participant about gentrification:

Los Angeles Participant: 'cause even now with this gentrification, I live, uh, Baldwin Hills community. Nice community. You got the White

people coming in, and we have a way in which we live. We walk through alleys. You know, some people that, you know, nice, clean alleys you take the shortcut home? You know, and they calling. Somebody suspicious Black kids in the alley. No, they walking home. Baltimore Participant: Yeah, they're taking the shortcut home. That's what I would do that in the past.

Los Angeles Participant: Yeah, taking the shortcut, but . . . so, that brings . . . so, they're in fear for themselves, so when the police come out [in] fear and they shoot first and they ask questions later.

Lower levels of police contact do appear to correlate with fewer discussions of distorted responsiveness. Participant pairings who report medium-low (stopped three to four times in one's life) or low (stopped no more than two times in one's life) levels of police contact are less likely to feature distorted responsiveness. One explanation mentioned earlier is the intersection of location and race, where neighborhood predicts levels of police contact. Take the example from a Black woman speaking in the Milwaukee Portal:

Yep, well as far as my take on police, I live in the suburbs um called West Alice, and so my interaction with police are kinda mixed. Um when I'm in West Alice in the suburbs they don't uh for the most part they don't bother me too much out there. I get more interaction or I wouldn't say interaction I get followed more when I'm in the city or if I'm in another suburb like White Fish Bay or Fox Point. Um because typically over there are the really affluent people and so I'll get followed for like two or three blocks um and then they'll leave or something like that.

Her conversation partner in Baltimore, also a Black woman, reflects another common trend in dialogues where participants have low police contact in which participants associate contact with civilian behavior:

Well see with me myself and I, I don't never per se worry about what other people say, I worry about me how I carry myself how I present myself not talking to anybody because underneath the uniform they're still human. It's just a job like we have to do everyday so I look at it like that. You give me respect I'm gonna give it back to you because if I'm not doing anything wrong, there's no reason why I would disrespect that person . . .

Participant pairings where one participant has had high levels of police contact (being stopped five or more times in one's life) are more likely to discuss distorted responsiveness. However, participant pairings where both experience high levels of police contact do not describe distorted responsiveness at

higher levels. One reason for this trend may be that pairings with high levels of police contact that do not discuss distorted responsiveness describe experience with police-initiated contact and are less likely to initiate contact in pursuit of protection. Unsurprisingly, this pattern also corresponds with male pairings discussing distorted responsiveness at lower rates, as men in our sample are more likely to experience high levels of police contact.

Conversations where distorted responsiveness is not present are likely to take several forms. One of the most common is the exclusive discussion of overpolicing, which is apparent for participant pairings with low levels of trust, high levels of police contact, and who are more likely to be male. Another discourse about police may focus on community-initiated violence over the actions of police or to justify police actions by describing the community's culpability. A third type of conversation where distorted responsiveness is absent is when participants have limited experiences with police.

The following tables reflect the patterns described in this section (Tables A5 to A11).

**Table A5.** Portals Location Descriptions.

City	Neighborhood	Total Participants	Dates	Dominant Race/Ethnicity	Neighborhood Type	Site Type
Milwaukee (227)	Amani/COA Goldin Youth and Family Center	227	April 2016–March 2017 (minimal thereafter)	Black	Segregated	Community Center and public park
Chicago (250)	Grand Boulevard/Harold Washington Cultural Center	53	September 2016–December 2016	Black	Segregated	Cultural Center
	South Chicago Christian Center	94	December 2016–May 2017 and August 2017–October 2017	Black	Segregated	Small thrift store
	Little Village/Instituto del Progreso Latino	58	November 2017–February 2018	Latino	In Transition/Educational	Alternative School
	Back of the Yards/LetUsBreathe Collective	45	March 2018	Black	Segregated	Activist
	South Los Angeles/Mercado la Paloma	217	December 2017–March 2018	Latino	In Transition	Community Market
Los Angeles (521)	Boyle Heights	9		Latino	In Transition	Community Arts
	LA Law Library	188	June 2017–September 2017	Racially Mixed	Downtown	Public library
	California State University Dominguez Hills	107	November 2017–December 2017	Latino & Black	Educational Institution	College campus
Baltimore (462)	Downtown/Lexington Market	162	February 2017–October 2017	Black	Downtown	Community Market
Mexico City (118)	Station North/Ynot Lot	301	November 2017–March 2018	Black	In Transition	Activist/Arts
	Chapultepec Park	118	June 2017–March 2017	Latino	Downtown	Public park
Newark (100)	Lincoln Park	100	April 2016–October 2017	Black	Downtown In Transition	Public park



**Table A6.** Race Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Race_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR
AB	0.300	0.483	10
B	0.613	0.495	31
BB	0.541	0.500	185
BM	0.318	0.477	22
BN	0.250	0.463	8
BO	0.426	0.500	47
BW	0.633	0.490	30
MW	0.200	0.447	5
OW	0.529	0.514	17
WW	0.000	0.000	5
AB	0.300	0.483	10

**Table A7.** Gender Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Gender_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
FF	0.4878049	0.5060608	41	0.0790334
FM	0.5098039	0.5015456	153	0.0405476
MM	0.4589041	0.5000236	146	0.0413822

**Table A8.** Crime Victimization Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Crime_vic_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
NN	0.368	0.489	38	0.0793022
NY	0.528	0.501	127	0.0444758
YY	0.483	0.501	180	0.0373510

**Table A9.** Police Stop Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Police_stop_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
NN	0.457	0.505	35	0.0854337
NY	0.481	0.502	131	0.0438209
YY	0.500	0.501	184	0.0369611

**Table A10.** Police Trust Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Trust_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
Mostly-Mostly	0.200	0.447	5	0.2000000
Mostly-Never	0.528	0.506	36	0.0843849
Mostly-Rarely	0.286	0.469	14	0.1252940
Never-Never	0.559	0.504	34	0.0864344
Rarely-Never	0.571	0.501	42	0.0772860
Rarely-Rarely	0.500	0.511	24	0.1042572
Rarely-Sometimes	0.568	0.501	44	0.0755370
Sometimes-Mostly	0.429	0.507	21	0.1106567
Sometimes-Never	0.522	0.503	69	0.0605766
Sometimes-Sometimes	0.351	0.484	37	0.0795654

**Table A11.** City Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

City_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
BC	0.278	0.461	18	0.1086325
BL	0.432	0.497	139	0.0421633
BM	0.578	0.499	45	0.0744603
CM	0.559	0.499	118	0.0458985
LM	0.500	0.511	24	0.1042572

**Table A12.** Contact Pairing Summary Statistics for Distorted Responsiveness (DR).

Contact_pair	Mean_DR	SD_DR	n_DR	SE_DR
High-High contact	0.524	0.502	84	0.0548199
High-Low contact	0.517	0.502	120	0.0458095
High-Medium contact	0.596	0.496	47	0.0723567
Low-Low contact	0.397	0.493	58	0.0647937
Low-Medium contact	0.394	0.496	33	0.0863769

Note. Police stops refer to being stopped for something other than a traffic violation. A high level of contact refers to participants who report being stopped five or more times in their lifetime. Medium contact refers to being stopped three to four times in one's lifetime. Low contact refers to being stopped two times or less in one's lifetime.

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## **Authors' Note**

This article is part of a larger project with Amar Bakshi of Shared\_Studios. More information about the Portals Policing Project can be found at [www.portalspolicing-project.com](http://www.portalspolicing-project.com).

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The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Notes

1. Portals were the creation of artist and entrepreneur Amar Bakshi and his organization, Shared Studios (Murphy 2014). Since 2014, he has used Portals to enable 150,000 conversations among 75,000 people, in 48 sites in more than 15 countries, including in Berlin, Germany; Herat, Afghanistan; Havana, Cuba; Seoul, South Korea; Detroit, New York City, and several others. We partnered with Bakshi to locate Portals in several neighborhoods in U.S. cities to initiate dialogues about policing.
2. We do not discuss our Portal installation in Mexico City in this article.
3. The sites were selected largely because of convenience and connections—the existence of community partners who would help run the Portal and share space. We often partnered with local nonprofit organizations that have an artistic and justice-oriented mission; they typically provide the Portal a physical space in a central location with high foot-traffic as well as an enduring connection to the community. They were deeply involved in the programming beyond our criminal justice dialogues.
4. At times, however, the process was messier in practice. Curators may take liberty with their framing of the question to make prospective participants feel comfortable with proceeding with the dialogue. They may also stay in the shipping container at the request of a participant. Participants may invite their peers in for support or safety. Some conversations may go longer than 20 minutes. We accept these tradeoffs, recognizing that as community members themselves, curators will have a better pulse than researchers on conditions amenable to what is often a sensitive dialogue.
5. In 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that about 16% of Americans 16 years or older had a face-to-face contact with a police officer in 2005, down from 21% in 2002. In total, 41% of these stops involved drivers in traffic stops (Durose 2010).
6. Unlike Cramer, and most political ethnographies to date, we purposefully do not insert ourselves into the conversations at all. Cramer participated in preexisting forums for discussion with community members with well-established relationships. In contrast, Portals are designed to convene strangers. The Portal experience is designed to facilitate intimacy and connection in a short amount of time, providing another reason not to center ourselves as researchers, which introduce both a professional and power dynamic that would turn an intimate real conversation into an interview.
7. Conversation introductions and departing words are omitted for the purposes of length.

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