Black lives and policing: The larger context of ghettoization

John R. Logan & Deirdre Oakley

To cite this article: John R. Logan & Deirdre Oakley (2017): Black lives and policing: The larger context of ghettoization, Journal of Urban Affairs

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2017.1328977

Published online: 11 Jul 2017.

Article views: 1

View Crossmark data
Black lives and policing: The larger context of ghettoization

John R. Logan* and Deirdre Oakleyb

*Brown University; bGeorgia State University

ABSTRACT

President Lyndon Johnson’s appointment of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (Kerner Commission) followed a series of inner-city riots in the 1960s. The commission’s 1968 report, issued months before Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassination, famously concluded that the United States was moving toward separate societies, one Black and one White. In recent years, another version of racialized violence has garnered public attention: systemic police brutality and repeated killings of unarmed Black and Brown men by police, spawning a new civil rights movement proclaiming Black Lives Matter. Condemnation of this violence and acknowledgment of its racial content by leading public officials is now standard fare, but criminal convictions and departmental discipline are scarce. This review essay brings attention back to the institutionalized racism called out by the Kerner Commission, arguing that occasional and even chronic police violence is an outcome rather than the core problem. A more fundamental issue is a routine function of policing—protecting the mainstream United States from the perceived risk from its “ghetto” underbelly through spatial containment.

We are at the 50th anniversary of Lyndon Johnson’s 1967 appointment of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder (also known as the Kerner Commission). Rioting was continuing at that time in Detroit, having already occurred on a large scale in Los Angeles (Watts 1965), Chicago (Division Street 1966), and Newark (1967). The Commission’s report the following year famously concluded, “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal” (Kerner et al., 1968, p. 1).

Most recently, public attention has focused on another version of racialized violence: systemic police brutality and repeated killings of unarmed Black and Brown men by police. Widely disseminated videographic evidence of homicide after homicide (shooting, tasing, choking, rough riding), instantly distributed through social media, has spawned a new civil rights mobilization proclaiming that Black Lives Matter (BLM), a nascent social movement centered on the problem of violence by agents of the state (Pellow, 2016). Condemnation of this violence and acknowledgment of its racial content by leading public officials became standard fare in 2015 and 2016, though criminal convictions and even departmental discipline of offending officers were scarce.

The purpose of this review essay is to bring attention back to the institutionalized racism that was highlighted by the Kerner Commission (Kerner et al., 1968). We argue that occasional, even chronic police violence is not the core problem. Instead, the more fundamental issue is a routine function of policing: protecting the mainstream United States from the perceived risk from its “ghetto” underbelly. This view has deep roots in urban sociology and criminology but has tended to be sidelined in mainstream commentary, which treats police violence as the problem and misbehavior as a correctible flaw. Doing so leads to superficial analysis and ineffective response. More salient, we contend
that police violence cannot be understood without reference to the “two societies” identified by the Kerner Commission.

We intend this essay as a statement of a point of view. We offer some new information and refer to evidence from other sources and also point to the need for additional evidence. We contend that crime and policing are just two of the elements—and not likely the main ones—in a system of separation and containment manifested in many other ways. These include residential segregation, inequality in public schools, displacement, as well as health and environmental inequality. We refer to all of these forms of spatial containment as ghettoization, regardless of whether they occur in inner cities, suburbs, or anywhere else. If policing is designed to control the ghetto, police violence may reflect poor training and control, but it is not surprising if it is consistently targeted at “menacing” populations.¹

Lately, scholars have avoided referencing the ghetto, in part because it has a pejorative connotation and in part because it stereotypes these neighborhoods and their residents (Hutchison & Haynes, 2011; Small, 2014). However, ghetto evokes a reality of containment and control that is hard to convey with a different term. It has a long history. As Duneier (2016) stated in reference to Drake and Clayton’s (1945) seminal work,

[These authors] used the ghetto idea to (1) highlight the difference between black neighborhoods and other neighborhoods; (2) ascribe ghetto conditions to a vicious cycle of outside repression and inside decay; and (3) argue that the separate institutions brought about by the ghetto were inherently inferior to the those outside while still serving as a source of pride and a rounded life. (p. 66)

Further, it has another existence in the public imagination. We draw here on Anderson’s (2012) concept of the iconic ghetto, the ghetto that African Americans may not escape by occupational mobility or moving to the suburbs. Ironically a term once used to evoke pride and Black authenticity (as in Hughes’ [1931] poem “The Negro Ghetto”) now has a thoroughly negative connotation. As we intend it, what defines the ghetto today is how profoundly it is racialized in the public imagination, how strongly it limits the opportunities of its residents, and how effectively mainstream institutions maintain the boundaries around it.

In the following sections, we first briefly review several arenas of institutionalized containment. The evidence is clear in many domains that boundaries of various kinds have been erected. These result in deeply entrenched disadvantages for minority and lower income people. Yet segregation is widely ignored, denied, or approved of by the U.S. public. We then turn directly to policing. We frame policing as boundary work (Lamont & Molnar, 2002), referencing the many ways in which social divides (based on class, race, or other criteria) are established, reinforced, and made to work to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others. We tie this approach to theoretical arguments that have been developed in the field of criminology. Disparate treatment of minorities by the police shares in the legitimacy afforded to disparate outcomes in other domains. Finally, we draw from this discussion a critique of actual and potential policy responses. Although some new restraints on police violence appear to be emerging, the public’s appetite for limited reforms seems to be too easily satisfied. The core issues of ghettoization, so clearly identified in the 1960s, are hardly on the table for discussion.

Ghettoization: Arenas of containment

The institutionalized segregation of minorities and lower income persons and their exclusion from the resources that are taken for granted by others were fundamental to the Kerner Commission’s analysis of civil disorders. The commission identified three major dimensions of racial boundaries (Kerner et al., 1968):

- Persistent discrimination and segregation in employment, education, and housing, which have resulted in the continuing exclusion of great numbers of Negros from the benefits of economic progress.
Black in-migration and white exodus, which have produced the massive and growing concentrations of impoverished Negroes in our major cities, creating a growing crisis of deteriorating facilities and services and unmet human needs.

The Black ghettos, where segregation and poverty converge on the young to destroy opportunity and enforce failure. (p. 5)

It is sobering that in 2017, we can so readily continue from where the commission left off 50 years ago. Circumstances have evolved but also persisted. A major difference today is that the commission referred to the situation of Black Americans. That is no longer tenable when Hispanics are the largest minority group and suffer many of the same disadvantages as Blacks. Still, issues of criminal victimization and police violence have been more salient to the Black community. Hispanics deal with gang violence but generally live in safer neighborhoods than Blacks (Davies & Fagan, 2012). Their distinctive encounters with law enforcement relate to immigration status, handled by a deportation bureaucracy rather than by police in the street (Becerra, Wagaman, Messing, & Castillo, 2016).

Large shares of Blacks and Hispanics continue to be confined to living in substandard conditions. Recent research documents inequalities in neighborhoods and housing; displacement and dispossession; public school systems; and health disparities and environmental racism. These arenas overlap, interact, and reinforce one another. These are discussed below.

**Neighborhoods and housing**

An extensive literature documents that segregation between Whites and Blacks remains very high, despite have fallen from its peak in the 1970s and 1980s. Hispanics are nearly as segregated with no change in their degree of separation in the last 3 decades and, on average, Blacks and Hispanics live in neighborhoods with higher poverty, lower homeownership, lower home values, and higher crime than do comparable Whites and Asians (Adelman & Mele, 2015; Logan & Stults, 2011; Massey & Denton, 1993).

Discrimination against racial and ethnic minorities persists in private housing markets in metropolitan areas across the country (Werth, 2013). Although civil rights legislation has resulted in less overt discrimination, more subtle forms have persisted. In addition, legislation that charged government at all levels to affirmatively further fair housing has had little enforcement (Denton, 1999; Korman, 2008). Redlining (the federal government’s identification of poor and minority neighborhoods in the 1930s where home mortgages would not be guaranteed) is formally ended, but evidence abounds that minorities are disproportionately turned down for mortgage loans in the private sector and were specifically targeted by banks for high-interest loans prior to the foreclosure crisis (Hartman & Squires, 2011; Immergluck, 2009).

**Displacement and dispossession**

Residential segregation is intimately tied with patterns of urban development and neighborhood change. The standard pattern of change that created the large minority zones of cities was desertion of aging neighborhoods by Whites, making possible an initial “invasion” by minorities and eventual “succession,” as the neighborhood lost nearly all White residents (Duncan & Duncan, 1957; Taeuber & Taeuber, 1965). Logan and Zhang (2010) identified a new trajectory toward global neighborhoods, where a White neighborhood is first integrated with Hispanic and Asian newcomers who are subsequently joined by Blacks in a diverse community that has unprecedented stability. But although this neighborhood type is becoming more common, it is mainly a phenomenon of the middle class, while the poorest neighborhoods are all-minority, especially Black, Hispanic, or a mix of Black and Hispanic residents. These all-minority neighborhoods are also growing in number, and it is rare to find Whites entering poor minority zones.
Gentrification and displacement also occur in some places (e.g., portions of Manhattan, the District of Columbia, and San Francisco, as well as a growing number of other cities), moving the boundary line between the ghetto and the mainstream (Hyra, 2015). Although the private real estate market can drive such changes, they can accrue from explicit public policy goals such as the deconcentration of poverty associated with spatially concentrated public housing. In this case, public housing has been demolished and replaced with mixed-income housing that provides far fewer affordable units, requiring relocation for the majority of public housing residents to a sector of the private rental housing market that accepts housing voucher subsidies (Goetz, 2013; Oakley, Ruel, & Reid, 2013). For most, this results simply in displacement from one racially segregated, high-poverty environment to another similar one.

**Public schools**

Public schooling closely links to neighborhood and community-level residential segregation because of the strong tradition of neighborhood schools, local control, and local financing of schools through property taxes. Schools are less segregated than neighborhoods due to a very aggressive process of desegregation, following the 1954 landmark Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court decision. Actual desegregation was mostly deferred until the late 1960s, and the process came to a standstill by 1980 (Logan, Oakley, & Stowell, 2008). Hence, a still substantially segregated system persisted.

Much evidence accumulated on the extent of racial/ethnic disparities in educational outcomes (Hallinan, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Maruyama, 2003; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). The 2003 National Assessment of Educational Progress showed that nationwide, only 54% of Black students performed at or above the basic level on the 2003 eighth-grade reading examination compared to 87% of White students (Stiefel, Schwartz, & Chellman, 2007). Dropout rates are much higher among Black and Hispanic students than among White and Asian students (Mickelson, 2003).

**Health disparities and environmental risk**

Racial disparities in health and mortality, particularly between Blacks and Whites, have persisted or even increased in the case of some diseases such as asthma, diabetes, and hypertension (Centers for Disease Control, 2013; Keppel, Pearch, & Wagener, 2002; Ruel, Oakley, Wilson, & Maddox, 2010). These disparities manifest at the neighborhood scale, and many scholars posit that they are partly attributable to neighborhood conditions (Garcia & Sharif, 2015; Gee & Ford, 2011; Jones, 2001; Robert, 1998, 1999; Ruel et al., 2010).

A factor recently highlighted by Desmond (2016) is substandard housing conditions in poor neighborhoods, including mold, bed bugs, rats, lead, and unstable structures. Environmental sociologists highlight disparities in the larger community context. Poor minority neighborhoods have inadequately built environment infrastructures in sidewalks, parks, playgrounds, and grocery stores and have historically been sites of toxic industries, typically in close proximity to major highways (Bullard, 1994). A large body of research demonstrated that poor and working-class Black neighborhoods have a disproportionate share of environmental hazards (Bandy, 1997; Bullard 1994; Bullard, Johnson, & Torres, 2009).

**Theoretical approaches to policing and police brutality**

How does policing fit into this system of containment? Criminologists have offered what Smith and Holmes (2003) referenced as the community-accountability and minority-threat approaches to police brutality (Foreman [2017] and other recent studies of crime and policing in minority neighborhoods found similar distinctions). The former treats police–minority tensions and police violence as natural but avoidable accompaniments of policing. The police officer has “a service occupation but of an
incongruous kind, since he must discipline those whom he serves. He is regarded as corrupt and inefficient by, and meets with hostility and criticism from, the public” (Westley, 1953, p. 35). In reaction, “Informal norms of police work define extralegal sanctions, particularly excessive force, as normal and essential instruments of control for handling individuals perceived as challenging officers’ authority, who pose a threat to their well-being, or who are otherwise discredited” (Smith & Holmes, 2003, p. 1037). By making police departments and individual officers more accountable to the community, and by developing clearer regulations and better training, unnecessary police violence can be limited.

The minority-threat thesis, in contrast, draws from a more general conflict theory of law according to which (see also Chambliss, 2001; Turk, 1969)

the presence of threatening minorities predicts the use of coercive crime control mechanisms, which help maintain the existing social order. In this view, police–minority tensions stem, inevitably, from enduring racial and ethnic divisions in American society that cannot be addressed simply by altering the organization of policing. (Smith & Holmes, 2003, p. 1037)

Hirschfield (2015, p. 1111) interpreted policing more bluntly as disguised suppression:

maintaining anachronistic levels of racial inequality and segregation (while preventing class-based solidarity) where legal equality prevails requires disguised strategies of suppression. Police violence is both a direct instrument of racial and ethnic control and a tool within associated schemes such as the wars on drugs, gangs, and fugitives.

The accountability approach has the attraction of pointing to practical solutions to a difficult problem, despite the fact that there is little new in the (up to now ineffectual) solutions put forward over the last several decades. The conflict approach, in turn, seems unaware that policing is at least partly organized to protect residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods that suffer the highest rates of victimization.

Policing as crime prevention: Police violence as misbehavior

The police are often understood as agents of social control in communities that cannot adequately control themselves. In this view, the police are reactive to the pathology of high-crime areas. This perspective is deeply rooted in social science traditions that concern the preservation of order. In urban theory, Chicago School ecologists famously outlined the spatiality of social pathology in the city. Following their insight, Shaw and McKay (1942, 1969) demonstrated that neighborhood indicators of social disorganization closely aligned with rates of delinquency. Delinquency appeared to be indelibly imprinted in certain neighborhoods, because the same areas continued to show high delinquency across decades, even when specific residents or resident ethnic groups had been replaced (Bursik, 1986; Stark, 1987). Whether because of the persistence of conditions that fostered crime or some form of transmission of behaviors across generations of residents, crime seemed embedded in some neighborhoods.

This point of view is also visible in William Julius Wilson’s (1987, 1996) treatment of poor inner-city neighborhoods and Sampson and Groves’s (1989) theorization of collective efficacy. Both emphasized structural conditions as fundamental causes, while also identifying aspects of local culture and social networks as mediating factors. In Wilson’s (1996) analysis, joblessness is the prime source of a set of self-destructive behaviors ranging from crime to teenage pregnancy, but these are abetted by the exodus of more appropriate role models from the neighborhood. Sampson and Groves (1989) showed that a similar set of structural conditions directly affected social disorganization, measured by surveys of local residents, and that social disorganization in turn was responsible for high rates of criminal victimization and criminal offenses. In later work, social disorganization was further elaborated as collective efficacy, the capacity of a neighborhood to maintain social control (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). More recently, the persistence of such neighborhood conditions in a broad historical framework has been systematically examined.
(Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2013). Although this research has been critiqued (for example, see, Sanchez-Jankowski, 2008), themes of social disorganization and lack of community cohesion continue to strongly influence criminology literature.

Given the premise of local social pathology, it would seem natural for strategies of policing to emphasize prevention and deterrence in high-crime areas, with the police filling in for the missing civil society. Hence, in many jurisdictions, staffing and patrol assignments are higher in riskier areas. It is a short step from there to shift away from responding to reports of crime to anticipating which locations and which persons are more likely to be responsible for future criminality. The “zero tolerance” tactics of many police departments since the 1990s exemplified the methods. For example, a recent high-profile report on the Baltimore Police Department (BPD) from the U.S. Department of Justice (2016) found that BPD supervisors encouraged officers to issue citations and make arrests for low-level “quality of life” offenses, including loitering, trespassing, disorderly conduct, failure to obey, and disturbing the peace [a policy based on what is known as the “broken windows” theory of crime]. As part of this strategy, BPD leadership pressured officers to increase the number of arrests and to “clear corners,” whether or not the officers observed criminal activity. (p. 8)

Having encouraged these discretionary behaviors, the BPD is now charged with failing to manage the way the police used discretion (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016).

The Department of Justice did not list specific recommendations for reform, but the diagnosis clearly emphasizes deficiencies in BPD regulations, training, and monitoring. These were also the focus of the Kerner Commission’s (Kerner et al., 1968) recommendations 50 years ago. The commission found that the police are faced with demands for increased protection and service in the ghetto. Yet the aggressive patrol practices thought necessary to meet these demands themselves create tension and hostility. The resulting grievances have been further aggravated by the lack of effective mechanisms for handling complaints against the police. (Kerner et al., 1968, p. 8)

The commission then listed recommendations for reform:

- Review police operations in the ghetto to ensure proper conduct by police officers, and eliminate abrasive practices.
- Provide more adequate police protection to ghetto residents to eliminate their high sense of insecurity and the belief in the existence of a dual standard of law enforcement.
- Establish fair and effective mechanisms for the redress of grievances against the police and other municipal employees.
- Develop and adopt policy guidelines to assist officers in making critical decisions in areas where police conduct can create tension.
- Develop and use innovative programs to insure widespread community support for law enforcement.
- Recruit more Negros into the regular police force, and review promotion policies to insure fair promotion for Negro officers.
- Establish a “Community Service Officer” program to attract ghetto youths between the ages of 17 and 21 to police work. (Kerner et al., 1968, p. 8).

The contrast between these modest recommendations and the commission’s recognition of the underlying racial divide in society is striking. It stems from their acceptance of policing as necessary social control without acknowledging the role of policing in maintaining social boundaries.

**Policing as spatial containment of the ghetto**

An alternative approach is to think of policing as spatial containment of the ghetto. Duneier (2016) argued that the iconic ghetto can no longer be defined as hypersegregated places where poor and
working-class African Americans and Latinos live but needs to be reframed as a space for invasive social control and police surveillance. From a “White” perspective, “the ghetto is where the Black people live” and because the ghetto is also thought to be bad (a locale of drugs, crime, poverty, and unemployment), it needs to be contained (Anderson, 2012, p. 8). In contrast, James Baldwin (1960/1967), writing about Harlem, starkly stated the perspective of some ghetto residents: the police “represent the force of the white world, and that world’s real intentions are, simply, for that world’s criminal profit and ease, to keep the black man corralled up here, in his place” (p. 1). The Kerner Commission (Kerner et al., 1968) itself wrote about this aspect of policing:

The police are not merely a “spark” factor. To some Negroes police have come to symbolize white power, white racism, and white repression. And the fact is that many police do reflect and express these white attitudes. The atmosphere of hostility and cynicism is reinforced by a widespread belief among Negroes in the existence of police brutality and in a “double standard” of justice and protection—one for Negroes and one for whites. (p. 5)

Although some sociologists link high crime and deviance in the ghetto to failures of internal social control, others have noticed that it also connects with mainstream society. Indeed, early Chicago School ecologists recognized that although commercialized vice centered in the slum, it was supported by outsiders.

The patrons of commercialized vice … fit into the category of dual persons who circulate between two conflicting social worlds, namely, a world or respectability in the residential neighborhoods and a world of disrespectability in the downtown districts. The former offers them a life of shelter and security according to the sanctioned definitions of society; the latter, a life of adventure and romance in the realm of the disapproved. (Reckless, 1926, pp. 164–165)

McKenzie (1926) similarly described the slum as “the hiding-place for many services that are forbidden by the mores but which cater to the wishes of residents scattered throughout the community” (p. 146).

We offer two hypotheses. The first is the harder to test: that the standard policing strategy is to contain crime, insofar as possible, in the ghetto. Such a strategy would have several rationales: (a) due to insufficient resources to stamp out crime, limiting it to certain areas is more feasible; (b) containing crime in the ghetto maximizes public safety for those who live elsewhere; and (c) it is easier to concentrate force on crime hotspots than to address crime that is highly dispersed. As Stark (1987) speculated,

This is one of those things that “everyone knows” but for which there is no firm evidence…. In addition, it is primarily vice that the police tolerate in the neighborhoods, and the police tend to accept the premise that vice will exist somewhere…. They may even believe that by having vice limited to a specific area they are better able to regulate it. (p. 902)

Another factor is that the police may be complicit, taking kickbacks from commercialized vice activities (Venkatesh, 2006). For this and other reasons, containment does not necessarily mean effective crime control in the ghetto, although it may align with routinely harsh treatment of the kinds of residents who police perceive to be potential criminals.

What would constitute firm evidence for this hypothesis? Official documentation of such a strategy is unlikely, because it so clearly aligns with a heightened victimization of ghetto residents to the benefit of people in more advantaged places. Although it would likely be favorably understood by many of the latter, it would be politically difficult to defend in large urban police jurisdictions. Possibly, ethnographic researchers who are embedded with police officers over an extended period would learn whether those working at the street level understand their job in this way. Evidence showed that police actually perceive greater threat from Blacks than from others. Legewie (2016) showed that in the immediate aftermath of well-publicized fatal shootings of a New York police officer by a Black offender, police use of force in pedestrian stops of Black people (but not those of other races) increased substantially. After similar shootings by a White or Hispanic offender, no change occurred in police use of force. However, the perceptions of officers on the beat only
indirectly shed light on larger policy choices. Only high-level supervisors and public officials are in a position to explain strategy, and they have every incentive to provide more innocent rationales.

Our second hypothesis is that containment is also a purpose of policing outside the ghetto, in this case keeping away undesirables. Many suburban municipalities have their own police force that has the potential to behave like guards at gated communities, screening out nonmembers. Gentrified areas may be similarly guarded to protect and encourage an emerging middle-class enclave (Carbado, 2016). In this case, the threat is not from outsiders, and policing takes the form of increasing surveillance of the remaining poor minority residents who have not yet been displaced.

Anecdotal accounts are plentiful of minority persons being singled out for police stops because they appear not to “fit” in a majority-White context and, increasingly, people post videos to document what is commonly referred to as “driving while Black.” One highly visible example is a speech on the floor of the Senate by South Carolina’s Senator Tim Scott in 2016, recounting being stopped by police seven times in the last year. “The vast majority of time, I was pulled over for nothing more than driving a new car in the wrong neighborhood [our emphasis], or some reason just as trivial,” Scott said. “Imagine the frustration, the irritation, the sense of a loss of dignity that accompanies each of those stops” (Weigel, 2016, p. 1).

It is harder to find evidence of this behavior as official policy. An exception was in New Orleans in the 1980s, when Harry Lee, the local sheriff, held a news conference to announce stepped-up patrols in residential areas and commercial parking lots, with the primary target being Blacks. In the sheriff’s view,

If there are some young blacks driving a car late at night in a predominantly white area, they will be stopped. …
If you live in a predominantly white area and two blacks are in a car behind you, there’s a pretty good chance they’re up to no good. … It’s obvious that two young blacks driving a rinky-dink car in a predominantly white neighborhood … they’ll be stopped. (Kennedy, 1986, p. 2)

Here the usual racial profiling by police is specifically targeted to White areas of the city.

A stronger conclusion could be based on systematic reports of police stops. In the best case, one would know where a stop occurred, the racial composition of the location, the race of the person who was stopped, and that person’s place of residence (by ZIP code or census tract) to assess whether stops are particularly directed at outsiders. We are unaware of any jurisdiction that releases all this information, but suggestive evidence emerged from studies in Baltimore and Chicago. The Department of Justice’s critique of the Baltimore police revealed that a large share of police stops in the city’s majority white neighborhoods were of African Americans (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). A recent American Civil Liberties Union study in Chicago reported that “in Chicago’s predominantly white police districts—Near North, Town Hall, and Jefferson Park—the disparity between black population and percentage of stops is even stronger than city-wide data” (American Civil Liberties Union, 2015, p. 9). For example, in the Near North district, where Blacks comprise less than 10% of the population, 57.7% of stops were of Black people.

**Not just the city**

The inequalities described here are well documented. They are largely familiar to urban scholars and even to much of the public. Nevertheless, people have a tendency to bracket them as exceptional in some way, representing the past but not the present or the future. They aver that in a postracial United States, the old color lines are being overcome; the success of those who are leaving the inner city demonstrates the permeability of the status hierarchy.

We dispute this characterization. It is hard to leave the ghetto behind, largely because the United States is not postracial. The “iconic ghetto” is the foundation for the “iconic Negro” (Anderson, 2012). Middle-class black people represent the ghetto as they operate in predominantly white or racially mixed areas of the wider society. “The shadow of the ghetto follows individuals into their job
in universities, corporations, and medical practice” (Anderson, 2012, p. 14), wherever they are, conjuring a peril that needs to be contained (also see Wacquant, 2008).

To be sure, the suburbs have been opening up to minority residents. Although the total central-city population in the United States in 1980 was one-third minority (33.4% counting Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians), the suburban population in 2010 was nearly as large (31.3%), a major change from the image of all-White suburbia (Logan, 2014). Yet, even the most advantaged minorities—those with college degrees, owned homes, and professional occupations—are unable to convert their human capital and financial resources into living in suburban communities comparable to their White peers (Logan & Alba, 2002). Based on census tract data and qualitative interviews, Pattillo (2000) argued that Black outmigration to the suburbs is spatially contained by persistent residential segregation, penning up the Black middle class either within or in a short distance from the Black ghetto (see also Dawkins, 2004).

Logan (2014) drew on two readily accessible sources of information about the quality of people’s local environments to show how the inequalities represented by central-city ghettos are reproduced in suburbia. One is specifically about people’s neighbors, indicated by the poverty rate in the neighborhood where they live, reported in the 2006–2010 American Community Survey. The other is about local schools, specifically, the test performance in 2010 of students in schools that group members’ children attend. Figure 1 reports the poverty exposure of suburbanites. It shows large differences in the quality of groups’ neighborhoods. At one extreme, suburban Whites and Asians live, on average, in suburban neighborhoods where only about 6% of neighbors are below the poverty line. Blacks’ and Hispanics’ neighborhoods have an average poverty rate of around 12%, nearly twice as high.

A standard expectation—one that seems intuitive to the average American—is that these differences are mainly due to Hispanics’ and Blacks’ relatively lower incomes (in the average metropolitan area, they earn only 60–70% as much as Whites, whereas Asians actually earn more than Whites). Looking at each group separately, in all cases, more affluent households live in lower poverty neighborhoods. But controlling for income does not remove the large disparities across groups. In fact, lower income Whites (incomes below $40,000) live in neighborhoods with a lower poverty rate (8.2%) than affluent Hispanics (9.6%) or Blacks (9.0%) with incomes over $75,000. This finding conflicts with the usual assumption that residential inequality in the United States is mostly class based. In fact, even when they experience much success in the labor market, many minority-group suburbanites are relegated to neighborhoods with fewer resources. The same “separate and unequal” spatial containment that characterizes the central-city ghetto also appears in suburbia in contexts that are less disadvantaged overall.

Figure 2 assesses another indicator of neighborhood quality: the performance of public elementary schools. Schools’ test scores have been compared to other schools in the same state where students take the same fourth-grade reading test. Values in the table are the schools’ percentile ranking in the state for the school that the average child of each racial/ethnic group attended.
Schools in suburbs perform better than city schools. However, very similar disparities remain in both settings. The average suburban Black or Hispanic elementary student attends a school that ranks below the 45th percentile in the state, despite the suburban advantage. The average suburban White or Asian child’s school is above the 60th percentile. Even in suburbia, schools are separate and unequal.

Because suburban communities generally have higher income residents, better schools, and more community resources than city neighborhoods, it may seem less relevant to point out the segregation and spatial inequality in this zone. The most disadvantaged suburban neighborhoods do not compare with those in the inner city. Yet the daily experience of residents is apparently harsh. Without systematic evidence on people’s perceptions, we rely on an anecdotal illustration: the turbulent reaction in Ferguson, Missouri, to the shooting of a young Black man in August 2014. As a suburb well beyond the city limits of St. Louis, Ferguson does not fit the common stereotype of the ghetto. Yet, the population was more than two-thirds Black in 2010 in a metropolitan region that was less than 20% Black.

What are the other conditions of a Black suburb that may have made it ripe for protest against police violence? Many areas of the city and also East St. Louis, Illinois, are above 35% poor. Poverty in most of the suburban ring is below 12%. Ferguson itself is divided between tracts in the southern portion of the town in the range of 20–25% poor and those more to the north in the range of 12–20% poor. On average, in St. Louis suburbs, White students attend a school that scored at the 59th percentile on the fourth-grade reading test. The average Black student’s school is at the 25th percentile. This disparity is partly due to the much higher concentration of Black students in high-poverty suburban schools (free/reduced price lunch over 55%); 75% of Black students versus 17% of White students attend these schools. Ferguson’s 17 K–6 schools are typical of schools attended by Black students in St. Louis suburbs. They range from 51 to 98% Black. All but four are in the high-poverty category. Two schools stand out for higher performance (in the 43rd and 55th percentiles in reading), and the other 15 range from the 5th to the 25th percentile.

In this suburb, the U.S. Department of Justice (2015) uncovered patterns of policing that mirror the racial targeting that is more often reported in large cities. The municipal budget relies disproportionately on fines and fees generated by the police department and court system. Analyses of police department data revealed that African Americans were disproportionately likely to be stopped and to be cited and arrested following a stop. The culture of policing led officers “to see some residents, especially those who live in Ferguson’s predominantly African American neighborhoods, less as constituents to be protected than as potential offenders and sources of revenue” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015).
Conclusion: The ghetto and the policy debate

We now bring together these lines of thought to formulate a more general point of view about the ghetto, policing, and public policy. Our perspective echoes ideas about structural racism that should be kept in mind as urban scholars reflect on current concerns about police violence. The color line has been fundamental in the United States for centuries, but it is rare for public attention ever to be focused more than briefly on issues of race. This occurred in the late 1960s when court orders began enforcing school desegregation throughout the South, and pressure from the civil rights movement along with a succession of riots in major cities coaxed long-awaited legislation on voting rights and housing discrimination from a reluctant Democratic congress.

Then as now, police violence has been at the forefront of the civil rights agenda. Recent portrayals of Freedom Summer and the early Johnson administration in the entertainment media remind us that violent police reaction became a lever to delegitimize segregationist policies. Indeed, violence was provoked as a core strategy. Police killings of unarmed men and boys create a similar opportunity today. The mainstream United States is shocked by police killings, as they were when the brutality of the Jim Crow South’s treatment of Black protestors first appeared on national television. Now people view incidents of police brutality and killings again and again on social media.

Mobilized by these recent events, a coalition of more than 60 organizations associated with the BLM movement drafted a broad call in 2016 for fundamental changes, with detailed briefs regarding specific policy domains (Yamiche, 2016). Their claims displayed a recognition that police violence, however important in itself, was not their dominant concern. Their diagnosis was similar to that of the Kerner Commission (Kerner et al., 1968): a society pulled apart by racial boundaries. But unlike the Kerner Commission, their remedies match the diagnosis.

Unfortunately, neither the BLM diagnosis nor their remedies are gaining much traction, particularly in the aftermath of the election of Donald Trump to the presidency and appointment of Jeff Sessions as attorney general. Among Sessions’ first acts was a review of agreements on police reform that had been negotiated the previous fall and winter, with the intention of scrapping them. It is too early to know the fate of those agreements, but this reversal reveals the fragility of antiracist movements in the United States. At its height in 2016, the main mobilizing tactic of the BLM movement was to link protest marches with specific shooting incidents, and the narrative of “Black Lives” became more about the tragedies of individual victims (or the villainy of police officers) than about the impact of structural racism on the daily lives and life course of whole communities. Perhaps this is unavoidable. The mainstream media barely cover the broader agenda, focusing on the shootings and the protests. Yet, in this context an easy pivot for politicians is to recite the very steps that the Kerner Commission (Kerner et al., 1968) promoted—guidelines on the use of force, training against implicit bias, monitoring civil rights violations, building trust with the community, and now, body cameras—as though these were new and untried ideas.

Our history demonstrates that the United States does not support a politics of resistance, and neither does it pursue policies of meaningful reform in any long-term sustainable form. Congress has been controlled alternately by a Democratic Party that is satisfied with the mildest of redistributive reforms and a Republican Party always seeking to roll them back. Presently it is the latter. Despite this back and forth, the Supreme Court most routinely continues to proclaim color blindness or a diluted version of civil rights violations. This approach is a dereliction of duty in a nation where the color line has been and continues to be evident in most aspects of people’s lives.

A form of Black power is in place where high electoral turnout by Black Americans comfortably sustains a limited cadre of Black political officials who do not have the means to tackle basic problems (see Reed [1988] for an early assessment of this phenomenon). Latinos struggle to mobilize
a constituency that is preoccupied with daily survival into politics, not unlike poor Americans. The rhetoric of “people of color” is widely used, yet the major national and local organizations representing Blacks and Hispanics are hesitant to collaborate closely, except on occasional specific issues, because implicitly one has been pitted against the other in the public rhetoric.

The leading demand of the moment is to convict the police officers who broke the law, not to change institutions—and even that demand has yet to be met and advocacy efforts to move it forward could be thwarted by the current administration. Still, even if modest controls were imposed on police, if they were only rarely to shoot to kill or to beat up a prison inmate, if they conducted fewer random stops to disrupt would-be gangs or drug dealers, if they minimized race in their profiling of potential criminals, that would be a victory. Or perhaps it should be seen as a victory if a police chief were replaced with a new one having better rhetoric.

As urban scholars, we have little influence over policy, but we have an obligation to point out how the policy discussion has narrowed and how little it matches the scale of the problem. And how do we ourselves define the problem? Mostly we rely on the standard tools of social science to describe the race divide. We add something here by emphasizing how strongly disparities align with spatial inequalities, how intimately “separate” is connected to “unequal.” Large shares of the Black and Hispanic population are held apart from mainstream society in multiple arenas of containment, all of which operate through and are reinforced by institutionalized residential segregation, further reinforced by policing. In other words, they are contained in specific neighborhoods and schools, to the advantage of those whose neighborhoods are better served and better protected and whose schools are more likely to lead their children upward.

Ghetto, as we have said, is an ugly word. We would rather not use it. We could refer instead to poor inner-city neighborhoods, to areas of high minority presence or concentrated poverty. But it is more realistic to refer to ghettos and ghettoization for two reasons. First, the specific local areas about which we write, though not walled quarters like the Jewish ghettos of a previous era, are clearly bounded and their boundaries are defended. We know that a boundary has been crossed when a Black or Hispanic man is pulled over when driving in a majority-White neighborhood, or when White residents protest an attendance plan that would close a poorly performing school and enroll those children in a better one, or when hotels in a more affluent neighborhood are used as temporary housing for homeless people.

Second, containment is not only in real neighborhoods but in the neighborhoods that people imagine. As important as the unequal allocation of resources is to the processes of uneven development, we cannot make sense of the menacing nature of minority neighborhoods and minority presence without reference to how the media and public policy rhetoric imagine communities. They are perceived as the ghetto; they constitute the iconic ghetto. As Mr. Trump stated in the second presidential debate: “You walk out the street, you buy a loaf of bread and you end up shot” (Diamond, 2016, p. 1). The ghetto continues to be an active concept in the public’s imagination and is easily manipulated in political rhetoric when it becomes a useful election tool.

Policing has a role that society has defined as legitimate and necessary in dealing with the ghetto, containing it and defending us against the hazard that it poses. Police officers are asked to perform a task under conditions of some personal risk that much of the public demands. It would be surprising if doing this task did not routinely degenerate into racial profiling and harassment and sometimes result in violent misdeeds. Certainly there is misbehavior by police. Certainly it would be better if police were better trained, better supervised, and better equipped to serve the areas they patrol. But from our perspective, the focus on misbehavior is scapegoating. It insulates mainstream institutions—the police department, public officials, and the public—from blame for what we ask systems of policing to do on our behalf.
Notes

1. In making this claim, we do not deny other functions of policing, including the protection of residents in poor neighborhoods; to be sure, this is its stated function. But if the underlying aim is to contain the ghetto, it is unsurprising that ghetto residents are hesitant to collaborate with it.

2. We acknowledge here that significant disparities exist between various Asian groups, exemplified by Tang’s (2015) research on Cambodian refugees in New York City, which speaks clearly to this issue. However, despite wide disparities in all of these groups, on average, Blacks and Hispanics have lower incomes and live in neighborhoods with fewer resources, regardless of their social class.

3. At a local city level, please see Connor (2015) concerning the outcome of the 2011 voting rights suit in Atlanta, Lowery v. Deal, which was dismissed citing colorblindness.

Acknowledgments

We thank the reviewers and editors for their helpful comments and critiques.

Funding

This research was supported by the staff of the research initiative on Spatial Structures in the Social Sciences and the Population Studies and Training Center at Brown University (via NICHD grant R24 HD 041020). The authors have full responsibility for the findings and interpretations reported here.

About the authors

John R. Logan is Professor of Sociology at Brown University. He directs the American Communities Project, which provides data on segregation and community disparities that are reported in this article.

Deirdre Oakley is a Professor of Sociology at Georgia State University. Her research focuses on how urban social disadvantages in public education, housing, health, and neighborhood change/redevelopment are often compounded by geographic space and racialized urban policies. She has provided congressional testimony on public housing preservation to the Financial Services Committee.

References


