NEGOTIATING ORDER IN PATROL WORK:
AN ECOLOGICAL THEORY OF POLICE RESPONSE TO DEVIANCE*

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The recent renaissance of ecological research in criminology has brought with it a renewed interest in the relationship between crime and social control in local communities. While several researchers have noted that the police are a critical part of the community crime-control puzzle, there is very little research and no theory that addresses variation in police behavior across physical space. In an attempt to further understand police operations in local communities, this article offers a theory that explains how levels of crime and other forms of social deviance in communities affect police action. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the theory for understanding how police behavior varies across physical space and how crime patterns develop and are sustained in local communities.

The recent renaissance of ecological research in criminology has brought with it a renewed interest in how features of local communities influence the operation of social control. This issue first emerged in Shaw and McKay's (Shaw and McKay, 1942; Shaw et al., 1929) efforts to explain why rates of crime and delinquency vary across subsections of urban areas. They argued that differences in the economic status, residential stability, and population composition of urban neighborhoods lead to differences in the capacity of residents to control the actions of their fellows, which in turn, lead to differences in rates of crime and delinquency across neighborhoods. Their neighborhood-level model of crime and control fell out of favor in the 1950s as the ecological study of crime was pushed to the margins of criminology by the rise of social-psychological theories of crime and delinquency, which came to dominate the discipline (see, e.g., Reiss, 1986, and Stark, 1987, for discussions of this phenomenon). Within the past two decades, ecological research has reemerged in criminology, bringing with it renewed interest in the linkages among community, crime, and social control.

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While Shaw and McKay's interest in social control was limited to informal control, recent research has expanded the scope of inquiry to include formal control as well, particularly the legal institution most closely coupled with community life—the police. Work in this vein has examined, for example, how differential patterns of policing across areas of cities can affect patterns of criminal offending (see, e.g., Bursik et al., 1990; Carter and Hill, 1978). Such studies have led researchers to recognize that any attempt to explicate comprehensively the community crime-control nexus must account for variability in police operations across physical space (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993). Noticeably absent from the ecological literature on crime and control, however, is any systematic attempt to specify how and why patterns of policing vary across communities.

The policing literature likewise offers little insight into the matter. Since the police became an object of social scientific inquiry in the 1960s, research has focused on how the immediate circumstances of police-citizen encounters—citizens' actions and status characteristics, for example (e.g., Black and Reiss, 1970; Lundman, 1974; Smith, 1987)—and features of police organizations (e.g., Brown, 1981; Wilson, 1968) might influence what officers do. A few studies have considered the possibility that police action might vary across urban neighborhoods (e.g., Slovak, 1987; Smith, 1986), but none contains any systematic theory linking police activity to the ecological contexts in which it occurs.

Although neither the literature on the ecology of crime and control nor the policing literature includes any systematic theory of how and why police behavior varies across physical space, they do provide some direction for the development of such theory. Among the noteworthy developments in the recent ecological literature is recognition that crime levels can have profound consequences for the operation of social control in local communities. This theme has emerged over the past decade in research that indicates that one critical reason why some communities develop and sustain high rates of crime is that crime and control are related in a dynamic process whereby increasing crime compromises the capacity of local control mechanisms to regulate deviance, which in turn, allows crime to thrive (e.g., Bursik, 1986; Schuerman and Korbin, 1986; Skogan, 1990; Stark, 1987). There is evidence that the police are one of the social control mechanisms affected by community-level crime patterns. Several researchers have reported that police officers in urban ghettos often fail to take reports or make arrests in the wake of crimes that would typically prompt a formal response in other types of areas. Goldstein (1960), for example, reports that the police in one ghetto area took no formal action in 38 of the 43 felony-grade assaults that occurred there during a one-month study period (see also, e.g., Black, 1980; Kress, 1980; La Fave, 1965; Niederhoffer, 1967; Stark, 1987). At least one writer (Stark,
1987) suggests that police leniency in ghettos is largely a consequence of the high levels of crime typically present in such areas.

This notion is consistent with two complementary, yet distinct, ideas from other realms of the crime and justice literature. The first is derived from Durkheim’s (1938) notion that there is a general equilibration in levels of deviance in given populations over time. The “stability of punishment” hypothesis posits that there is also a general equilibration in the amount of punishment that social control systems mete out. As a consequence, when levels of deviance are high, only more serious deviant acts are punished (e.g., Blumstein and Cohen, 1973; Moynihan, 1993). The second comes from macro-level deterrence research, which typically finds an inverse relationship between levels of punishment and crime rates in population units. The “overload hypothesis” explains such findings in terms of the capacity of social control institutions to respond to deviance; as crime rates increase, capacity is strained, so less energy is devoted to each case, which reduces the certainty of punishment (e.g., Geerken and Gove, 1977; Pontell, 1978, 1984).

I take this general notion of an inverse relationship between levels of deviance and vigor of formal social control response as a point of departure to develop a theory of the ecology of police behavior that explains why officers who patrol communities with higher levels of crime and other forms of social deviance will tend to police in a more lenient fashion than their peers who patrol lower crime/deviance communities. After specifying how the macro-level social organization of American policing creates a network of independent ecological communities across the nation, I detail how this ecological structure intersects with the organizational structure of police departments to create a network of territorially based independent work groups within and across police organizations. I then specify how levels of crime in the communities these groups patrol influence the negotiation of informal work rules about how officers should handle encounters with citizens, which they then follow to produce the aforementioned inverse relationship between levels of social deviance and the vigor of police action. Below, following a brief discussion of precisely what the theory is designed to explain, I present the theory, beginning with an overview of the ecology of police work.

**SPECIFICATION OF THE DEPENDENT VARIABLE**

The theory presented below is designed to explain variation in the degree to which police officers extend their formal legal authority in encounters with citizens by making arrests, taking reports, conducting investigations, and so on. For ease of presentation, I use the terms *vigor*
and leniency to represent opposite ends of the formal authority continuum. Thus, an arrest constitutes more vigorous formal authority than no arrest, a report more vigor than no report, longer investigations more vigor than shorter ones, and so on.

The notion of variability in the application of formal legal authority by the police is similar to, but not isomorphic with, Black's (1976, 1980, 1989) idea of variation in the quantity of law embodied in police behavior. Black (1980) specifically includes officers' use of physical force against citizens and the length of time that officers spend handling cases as aspects of the amount of law officers apply in social life. Both force and time, however, can vary independently from formal authority. Where force is concerned, officers can (and do) use physically coercive tactics in situations in which they make arrests and in situations in which they jail no one. Where time is concerned, increasing formal authority typically involves increasing time expenditures (discussed below), but not always. For example, while arresting a batterer takes more time than ignoring his offense entirely, in-depth mediation sessions can take far longer than processing an arrestee for simple battery. The amount of force officers use and the amount of time they expend handling calls—as well as other dimensions of law embodied in police action, such as the amount of protection it affords the vulnerable and the degree of due process it extends to criminal suspects—may well vary systematically across physical space. Indeed, much of the theory developed in this article may well be applicable for understanding spatial variation in dimensions of police behavior besides formal authority. At this stage, however, I confine my attention to variation in police vigor/leniency.

THE ECOLOGICAL CONTEXT OF PATROL WORK

Because ecological research examines "communities"—systems of human settlement circumscribed by territorial and temporal boundaries (e.g., Hawley, 1950, 1986)—the first order of business in any ecological work is to specify precisely the areal units that constitute the "communities" of interest. While this critical task is often quite difficult (e.g., Bursik and Grasmick, 1993), it is rather straightforward where police patrol work is concerned for the macro-level social organization of American policing creates clearly demarcated ecological communities in which patrol work takes place.

Policing in America is a territorially organized enterprise that is extremely decentralized. Although there are federal and state police, by law the provision of basic police services is primarily the responsibility of county and municipal governments. Each county has a sheriff's office that has primary responsibility for providing police services in unincorporated
areas of counties, while municipalities provide police services in incorporated areas.\(^1\) There is no precise enumeration of U.S. police departments, but most counts place the number between 15,000 and 20,000 (e.g., Langworthy and Travis, 1994). Thus, policing in the United States consists of a massive patchwork of distinct police organizations delineated by political boundaries.

Territorial circumscription of police labor continues within these numerous individual agencies in the manner in which patrol services are allocated. In all but the smallest municipalities, the sheer physical size of jurisdictions dictates that they be subdivided into manageable sections for patrol work. Police agencies exhibit a high degree of isomorphism in response to this need; all jurisdictions of sufficient size are divided into a number of smaller areas—typically called beats—to which single patrol units (one or a pair of officers) are typically assigned primary policing responsibility at any given time. In smaller jurisdictions, all patrol beats are managed by a single command structure. As the size of jurisdictions increases, however, the number of beats can stretch the management capacity of a single administrative structure. In larger agencies, where this span-of-control problem arises, patrol beats are grouped to form separate territorial units with separate administrative structures—typically called divisions, precincts, or districts—that are linked by the department’s superordinate administrative structure. In larger jurisdictions, then, physical territory is first broken down into precincts or districts and then into patrol beats within them. In sum, the division of police labor along administrative and political boundaries creates three basic types of geographic zones in patrol work: the entire area of separate jurisdictions, patrol districts within larger jurisdictions, and individual car beats that subdivide small departments and districts of large ones.\(^2\)

Ecological communities are created by the manner in which patrol work is carried out vis-à-vis the three types of patrol areas. The task of policing given jurisdictions and districts is the corporate responsibility of all officers whose beats make up the larger areas. Although officers are deployed as single units to particular beats, they frequently cross beat boundaries within their district or jurisdiction to assist their fellow officers, fill in for

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1. Four additional features of the provision of basic police services in the United States should be noted: (1) state police officers provide basic police services in some rural areas; (2) in some states, sheriffs' departments are augmented by constables or similar county-level functionaries; (3) some municipalities provide police services by paying a fee to their parent county for coverage; and (4) in some places university, airport, transit, and other “special district” police departments augment local law enforcement agencies (see, e.g., Langworthy and Travis, 1994; Ostrom et al., 1978).

2. Some police agencies group beats within districts to form “sectors” (usually two or three per district). See for example, Seattle Police Department (1989).
them, or both, as work demands require (e.g., Reiss, 1971; Wilson, 1968). District and jurisdictional boundaries are not as permeable. As the following passage from Rubinstein (1973:129) illustrates, only in unusual situations will officers deployed in a given district or employed by a given jurisdiction engage in police work outside their primary realm.

Before a policeman can do any work easily, he must know where he is. The framework of a patrolman’s geographical knowledge is established by the extent of his territorial jurisdiction. He has no need to know about places beyond the district’s limits. The first thing he learns about his district, after the station house, is its boundaries. His knowledge of what lies beyond them is limited and his curiosity restricted. If he is assigned a border sector, he may get to know several of the men who work opposite him; he may even share lunch with them occasionally. Otherwise contacts across district lines are limited to chance encounters at local hospitals and occasional exchanges when the men come to each other’s aid on assists.

The shared responsibility within and exclusivity across jurisdictional and district boundaries create distinct systems of policing at the district and small jurisdictional level. Thus, while all jurisdictions, districts, and beats are delineated by geography, only the collections of beats that form small jurisdictions and districts of large ones have the social and territorial unit character that defines community as human ecologists (e.g., Hawley, 1950, 1986) use the term. For simplicity’s sake, from this point on such groupings of beats will be called patrol districts, regardless of whether the district is a distinct jurisdiction unto itself or a subsection of some larger jurisdiction.

THE FORMAL ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT OF POLICING

While policing occurs in the context of distinct ecological communities, it also occurs in the context of formal organizations. The key to why the community context of patrol districts is important for understanding police action turns on the interplay between the two.

WORK GROUPS IN POLICING

The same territorially based division of labor that delimits communities in American policing creates distinct, stable work groups in police departments. First, while the linkages between patrol and other officers—for example, detectives and officers assigned to crime suppression units—can differ substantially across agencies, officers working patrol in any district constitute a clearly identifiable entity unto themselves. Second, while there is substantial variability in how police organizations deploy patrol
officers within patrol districts—for example, some rotate officers across shifts every few weeks, while others keep them on the same shift for months (or even years) at a time; some rotate officers across beats on a regular basis, while others keep officers assigned to the same beat for long stretches of time—officers typically patrol given districts on a semipermanent basis, policing the same territory with the same colleagues on a daily basis. Group continuity is disrupted only by those comings and goings common to any organizational enterprise—new employees, resignations, promotions, transfers, and the like. Officers patrol by themselves or in pairs, but the responsibility for policing any given district is corporate. In the organizational sense then, patrol work occurs in the context of territorially based work groups.

Beyond the mandate of corporate responsibility for covering calls, many encounters with citizens are group activities. Two or more officers jointly handle many noncriminal encounters (e.g., traffic accidents) and in all but the smallest jurisdictions, officers typically do not engage alone in matters where crimes may be taking place (or may have recently occurred). Excepting very minor law violations (e.g., shoplifting), standard operating procedure dictates that at least two officers respond to criminal and potentially criminal matters. The officers on the scene execute whatever different tasks the particular encounter requires (e.g., in an assault call, interviewing citizens and searching for physical evidence). After gathering information, they share it with their peers, establish a course of action, and put it into motion with different officers taking whatever actions are deemed necessary. In this way the resolution of many encounters is arrived at through group processes (see, e.g., Rubinstein, 1973; Walsh, 1986).

The sense of group identity among the officers working any given patrol district is heightened by how they spend their time at work when not involved in encounters with citizens. Officers share locker rooms and attend roll calls prior to going on patrol. Throughout their shifts, they talk on the radio (and, when in use, send messages via computers; e.g., Independent Commission, 1991). When the radio (or computer) is too cold a communication format, officers meet to chat. They often eat together; patrol officers normally prefer to share meals with peers, and the popular stereotype of officers congregating over donuts and coffee has much basis in fact. These, and many other shared activities at work, serve to strengthen group bonds (see, e.g., McClure, 1984; and especially Rubinstein, 1973, for accounts of everyday patrol group interaction).

Having established that much police work is undertaken in the context of work groups whose membership is territorially delineated, I now turn to this article's central question: How do levels of crime and other forms of social deviance in the districts that officers patrol affect the decisions they
make about how to handle encounters with citizens? The first part of the answer lies in an examination of another aspect of the organizational context of policing: work rules.

WORK RULES IN POLICING

The behavior of organizational members is guided by rules. According to the classical, rational perspective in organizational theory, the rules that guide behavior are the formal directives devised by administrators to achieve organizational goals (e.g., Simon, 1957; Weber, 1946). A great deal of evidence indicates that in many realms of organizational life, however, formal rules do not determine completely how members actually behave. This is particularly true when workers must perform nonregular, complex tasks that require them to exercise judgment (e.g., Crozier, 1964; Galbraith, 1977). In such situations, workers' actions are based on either modifications of administrative rules or new rules devised by the workers themselves (e.g., Gouldner, 1954; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939).

Nowhere is this more evident than in government service bureaucracies that process members of the public. Here, many aspects of work are governed only by general principles—not formal rules—because much work is simply too varied and too intricate to be directed by organizational protocol (e.g., Lipsky, 1980; Prottas, 1979). This is clearly the case in police patrol work, where officers are called upon to handle a myriad of types of situations—from barking dogs to murders—each with its own peculiarities (e.g., Brown, 1981; Mastrofski and Parks, 1990). Because police administrators cannot create rules that direct officers to take specific action in encounters with citizens, they can do little more than provide broad guidelines about how to handle situations in a manner that upholds the fundamental police principles to protect life and property (e.g., Brown, 1981; Lipsky, 1980; Manning, 1977). In sum, by virtue of the fact that patrol work is not highly amenable to administrative rule making, patrol officers enjoy a high degree of autonomy from administrative control. This autonomy is heightened by the spatial and temporal structures of patrol work. Police-citizen interactions are highly irregular occurrences dispersed over substantial physical space. Consequently, administrators' capacity to monitor the conduct of patrol officers is quite limited (e.g., Brown, 1981; Reiss, 1971; Wilson, 1968). While administrators attempt to gain insight into what officers do by placing supervisory officers on patrol, making spot checks of interactions, and even putting video machines in patrol cars, among other things, no such tactics effectively overcome the handicap of managing work that they cannot directly monitor.3

3. There is substantial disagreement about how much autonomy line officers enjoy from police administrators. The "constrained rationality" model (e.g., Wilson,
Several authors have argued that the high degree of autonomy from administrative control that patrol officers enjoy allows them to develop highly individualized comportment rules, which each officer then follows to produce his or her own distinctive "style" of policing (e.g., Brown, 1981; Muir, 1977). The idea that each officer creates and follows his or her own rules of conduct, however, runs counter to a large body of organizational literature that indicates that extra-administrative behavioral norms are set and enforced by collective means (e.g., Gouldner, 1954; Roethlisberger and Dickson, 1939). Indeed, it does not square with policing literature that identifies informal group norms as the primary governors of major aspects of police activity, such as the use of physical force (Hunt, 1985; Waegel, 1984) and criminal case processing by detectives (Waegel, 1981). The idea that officers' actions are directed by individualized comportment rules also runs counter to a fundamental feature of the social reality of police patrol work. As noted above, many police-citizen encounters involve more than one officer. It is simply impossible for multiple officers to handle encounters collectively without some sort of corporate normative guidelines operating (e.g., Rubinstein, 1973; Walsh, 1986). In sum, while patrol officers enjoy an exceptional degree of autonomy from administrative control, they are by no means free to individually devise and act upon whatever rules they see fit. They, like members of all organizations, are subject to the constraints of the informal organization.4

If informal work group norms indeed guide officers' conduct, from whence do they arise? The more general question of how extra-administrative norms develop in formal organizations has interested researchers since the emergence of the idea of informal organization in the work of

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4. Proponents of the "styles" perspective claim that styles arise from informal group processes. Individuality is said to be embedded in the "culture" of policing; in a quid-pro-quo universal in patrol work, each officer pledges fealty to fellow officers in exchange for freedom to act as he or she wishes (e.g. Brown, 1981; Mastrofski et al., 1987). So long as officers support their peers by doing their best to protect them from physical danger and from administrative and legal punishment, they are free to handle encounters with citizens however they see fit. This line of argument, however, is undermined by the literature above that indicates that individual police officers are not free to act however they want. Particularly salient is Walsh's (1986) study, which shows that attitudinal differences among the officers patrolling a single New York City district do not translate into differential policing. He reports that officers who had little desire to make arrests would call their peers who did when they encountered circumstances that warranted an arrest. The "pro-arrest" officers would then effect the arrest. Thus, differences in officers' attitudes within the district did not translate into differences in the outcome of police-citizen encounters.
Roethlisberger and Dickson (1939), Mayo (1945), and others some 50 years ago. For the past three decades, the negotiated-order perspective, introduced by Strauss and his colleagues (Strauss et al., 1963, 1964) in their classic work on the emergence and maintenance of social order in mental hospitals, has dominated this research.

NEGOTIATING RULES IN POLICE PATROL WORK

The negotiated-order perspective is rooted in the classic interactionist idea that human behavior flows from the interpretive understanding that individuals have of social circumstance (e.g., Mead, 1934). Based on their perceptions of the organization and its relevant environment, organizational members negotiate the construction of conduct norms. Once the rules are in place, they hold force as individuals define situations according to group expectations, identify the rule(s) governing such situations, and act accordingly (e.g., Fine, 1984; Strauss, 1978; Strauss et al., 1963).

While the negotiated-order perspective emphasizes how organizational members define their world, as Fine (1984) points out, it rejects the radical phenomenological position that all negotiations and all orders are possible. Rather, it views the negotiations that take place and the orders that emerge from them as being highly dependent on social structure; the understandings that participants bring to the table are their understandings of particular objective social circumstances (e.g., Fine, 1984; Ranson et al., 1980). More specifically, objective features of the social world define the parameters of negotiations, that is, who will be involved and what will be addressed, and potential orders. In this way then, the rules that are set and the social order that ultimately emerges through negotiations in any setting are inextricably tied to the structural context that frames the setting.

Two features of the social organization of policing determine the primary parties to the negotiation of the rules that guide patrol officers’ conduct: (1) the high degree of autonomy that officers enjoy from administrative control and (2) the territorial division of labor that creates distinct community-based work groups. Because the patrol and administrative sectors are so loosely coupled, police managers are largely shut out, leaving line officers as the primary negotiators. Because officers are cloistered in their respective patrol districts, separate negotiations take place in each district. Thus, the high degree of autonomy that officers possess and the nature of the division of police labor structure matters so that officers in each patrol district devise work rules largely unencumbered by direct outside influence.

What is involved in the negotiations by which the rules of patrol district
work groups are devised? Negotiated-order theorists identify three features as particularly salient for negotiations in organizations: environments, mandates, and the work that must be done (e.g., Strauss, 1978). Compared to other organizational settings, the environment is particularly salient in police patrol work because officers are boundary personnel who are utterly immersed in the environment of the districts they patrol (Reiss and Bordua, 1967). This total immersion is critical because work group mandate and police workload both flow primarily from a single aspect of the patrol district’s environment: the level of crime and other forms of social deviance, which vary substantially across districts but typically remain quite stable over time within them. For example, while the murder rate among the 18 patrol districts the Los Angeles Police Department comprises ranged from 3 to nearly 150 per 100,000 residents in the mid-1980s, the district murder rankings tended to be quite stable for at least a decade (Los Angeles Police Department, 1986, 1996; see, e.g., Morris, 1957; Reiss, 1986; and Stark, 1987; for general discussions of variability and stability in crime levels across and within other spatial units).

Levels of deviance are important for officers’ mandate because the territorial circumscription of police labor translates the general police mandate to regulate deviance (e.g., Bittner, 1970; Brown, 1981) into a specific mandate for each work group to regulate deviance within the district it patrols. The rate of deviance is important for workload because the encounters that make up officers’ work (see below) are largely determined by the level of social deviance in the district they patrol. In sum, variation in levels of deviance across patrol districts means that across districts officers will have different approaches to the police mandate to regulate deviance and different work to do and that ultimately work group negotiations will occur in different structural contexts.

OFFICERS’ UNDERSTANDINGS OF CRIME AND DEVIANCE

Officers working different patrol districts develop different understandings of the levels of crime and other forms of deviance in the communities they police. First, the amount and nature of work that officers do differ. More radio calls tend to be dispatched in higher crime districts (Los Angeles Police Department, 1996; Los Angeles Times, 1992). While police managers in some larger departments try to even things out by assigning more officers to such districts (Walker, 1992), numbers of calls and of officers do not co-vary in an equilibrating manner across the nation. Consequently, officers in high-crime districts tend to be busier than their peers in low-crime districts (e.g., Goldstein, 1977; Los Angeles Times, 1989; Walker, 1992). Moreover, as levels of deviance increase, police dispatch centers institute triage procedures that screen out more and more calls involving low-deviance (e.g., illegally parked cars) and nondeviant (i.e.,
what Wilson, 1968, calls "service" matters; e.g., motorists locked out of their vehicles) matters, which means that officers are dispatched to proportionally more high-deviance details (e.g., shootings). (See Scott and Perry, 1983, for a discussion of triage in dispatch centers.) In a similar vein, as district deviance increases, officers proactively intervene in fewer low-deviance matters, which means that the average seriousness of officer-initiated encounters also increases with increasing district deviance. Because officers in higher crime districts more often deal with situations that involve greater degrees of deviance, they come to understand that their district is more crime ridden.

Second, officers learn a great deal about district-level deviance from information about details that other officers handle. Officers monitor the police radio airwaves and computer transmissions, which tell them (1) how busy their peers are and (2) the types of calls to which their peers are dispatched (e.g., "man with a gun" or "theft just occurred").5 They also discuss the level of activity in their districts, and the details of specific encounters, with their peers over the radio and/or through computers, during roll call, over dinner, and so forth (e.g., Brown, 1981; Independent Commission, 1991). Thus, officers indirectly develop a great deal of information about crime and deviance in their districts. The greater the workload and the more serious the calls officers learn about, the greater the level of perceived deviance.

Third, officers' perceptions about district-level deviance are shaped by the nature of public life in the areas they police. As levels of deviance increase, more individuals that officers (and most people) regard as deviants are out in public, and more deviant acts occur in public view (e.g., Stark, 1987). As levels of deviance increase, more deviants—for example, thieves, prostitutes, drug dealers and users—loiter in public places. Similarly, districts with higher levels of deviance experience more open drug dealing, more violence in public, more public acts of prostitution, and so forth. Because officers are paid to be suspicious (e.g., Skolnick, 1966), they constantly observe the public for evidence of deviant inclinations, behavior, or both. Officers know by sight many individuals whom they suspect or know to be criminals—for example, burglars, drug dealers, and prostitutes—who operate in their districts, as well as individuals on probation and parole who reside and/or work there. Officers also carry stereotypes of what criminals look like (e.g., Skolnick, 1966; Werthman and Piliavin, 1967), and they are alert to the presence of noncriminal deviants such as alcoholics and the mentally ill. While on patrol, officers note the

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5. The information that officers obtain through routine eavesdropping is somewhat less in agencies that employ in-car computers; many computer transmissions are sent only to the unit assigned the call and the patrol supervisor.
NEGOTIATING ORDER IN PATROL WORK

"known" criminals, individuals who fit the criminal stereotype, and non-criminal deviants in public places. The more criminals and criminal types that officers observe and the more apparently mentally ill individuals, alcoholics, and drug abusers they see cavorting, stumbling, and lying about the landscape, the higher the perceived level of deviance. In the same way, the more apparent criminal conduct—drug dealing, solicitation for prostitution, fighting, and so on—that officers see in public, the higher the perceived level of deviance.

Officers' impressions of district-level deviance are also shaped by other features of the areas they patrol. Police officers know from experience what social scientists have "discovered" through research: Deviance is correlated with numerous territorial properties, such as population density, standard of living, and the physical condition of areas (e.g., Stark, 1987; Wilson and Kelling, 1982). By paying attention to the sights, sounds, and smells of patrol, officers gain an impression of levels of crowding, deterioration, and living standard in their districts. While handling details, they gain impressions of household crowding, residents' standard of living, and the state of (dis)repair of commercial and residential structures. The more crowded the general area and individual domiciles seem to be, the more poverty stricken the area and its inhabitants appear, the more dilapidated the property, and the more that garbage litters the landscape and graffiti cover the walls, the greater the level of perceived deviance.

The experiences of officers in any given district will be similar for two reasons: (1) Social life is quite stable over time so officers policing any community see, smell, and hear very similar things (but see below). (2) As noted above, many encounters are group activities, so officers experience many things together. Moreover, officers' previously noted discussions about the calls they have handled and the state of affairs in the district bring individuals' similar impressions even closer into line with one another's. Thus, officers in any district essentially share a common understanding of the level of deviance in the community they patrol (see Brown, 1981:71, for a brief discussion of how work experiences lead to shared perceptions among officers).6

HOW EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING FRAME NEGOTIATIONS

With the sketch of district context of officers' experiences and understandings of deviance in hand, I now turn to specifying how differences

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6. See Skogan and Maxfield (1981) for a parallel discussion of how citizens develop common understandings of crime conditions in their neighborhoods through experience and discussions.
across patrol districts lead to differences in four critical factors that frame the negotiation among patrol officers of work group rules.

Normal and Deviant Deviance

A prominent theme in the criminal justice literature is that the beliefs that agents of social control hold about the nature of offenders and offenses are critical determinants of how legal sanctions are applied. Among the more compelling lines of argument in this tradition is that social control agents come to think of some crimes as “normal” in certain contexts, develop rules about how normal crime should be handled, and ultimately process cases exhibiting the characteristics of normal crime differently from cases of “deviant” crime (e.g., Sudnow, 1965; Swigert and Farrell, 1977).

Several researchers (e.g., Neiderhoffer, 1967; Rubinstein, 1973; Waegel, 1981) have noted the presence of the normal crime phenomenon in police work. Because officers in districts with high levels of crime and other forms of social deviance see more deviance and deviants in public, get involved in more serious encounters, observe more tawdry social conditions, and thus ultimately understand their districts as more deviant, they will view more types of deviance as normal.

The Deservedness of Victims

One of the more prominent issues in recent criminal justice research is the role that victims play in the actions of agents and agencies of social control (e.g., Erez and Tontodonato, 1990). By viewing crime victims as patrol officers’ clients, the literature on how members of formal organizations respond to clients can be brought to bear to identify the role that crime victims play in officers’ work group negotiations.

As Gross and Etzioni (1985) note, all boundary workers in formal organizations develop “commonsensical categories” of clients both to assist the work process and to express their view of clients’ moral worth. In a compelling study of this phenomenon, Roth (1972) details how hospital emergency room (ER) staff categorize patients in terms of how much they “deserve” medical treatment. Because they view “deserving” patients as worthy of medical attention, but not those they classify as “undeserving,” ER workers develop and follow rules that mandate provision of superior medical treatment to the former category of patients (see also, Jeffery, 1979). By drawing an analogy from hospital patients to crime victims, Roth’s conceptual scheme suggests that officers’ ideas of victim deservedness are critical grist for the negotiation of work group rules.

Two fundamental criminological truths shape officers’ views of crime victims’ deservedness: (1) Victims often bring crimes upon themselves by
engaging in deviant conduct that leads the criminal to act against them (e.g., Fattah, 1993; Wolfgang, 1958). (2) Many crime victims are themselves criminals—that is, citizens who are victimized in one instance are often offenders in others (e.g., Fattah, 1993; Lauritsen et al., 1991)—so the labels "victim" and "criminal" are transitory. From their day-to-day contacts with victims and offenders, police officers understand this truth only too well. They know, for example, prostitutes who are beaten, drug dealers who are robbed, and alcoholics who are mugged. Because the police mandate to regulate deviance is a mandate to protect the conventional citizenry, officers will view victims who precipitate their victimization and victims who are criminals in other contexts as undeserving.7 Beyond their ideas about particular victims, officers stereotype the populace of their district (i.e., the victim pool) as more or less deserving in general, based on their understandings of crime levels (e.g., Stark, 1987).

In both absolute numbers and proportionally, as levels of crime and deviance in areas increase, more criminals are victimized (e.g., Lauritsen et al., 1991; Wolfgang, 1958). Thus, officers in higher crime districts encounter more situations in which the line between victim and offender is blurred. Consequently, as district deviance increases, officers increasingly believe that larger segments of the population are undeserving. Territorial stereotyping magnifies this so that officers view citizens who live in higher crime areas as generally less worthy than those who reside in less crime-filled districts. This is exemplified in Stark's (1987:902) assertion that officers who work high-crime areas believe that residents "deserve what they get" when victimized.

Police Cynicism

A third manner in which levels of district deviance shape the negotiation of rules is through officers' perceptions of the utility of vigorous action against suspected offenders. As a whole, police officers are a cynical lot (e.g., Neiderhoffer, 1967; Regoli and Poole, 1978). Among the many objects of police cynicism is the American criminal justice system. Officers generally have little faith that the system remedies deviance (e.g., Waegel, 1984; Wiechman, 1979). Two facets of police work would appear to be the primary sources of such cynicism: (1) general exposure to deviance and (2) specific experiences that lead officers to believe that the American criminal justice system does not sufficiently sanction those whom they arrest. Exposure to deviance and a belief that the criminal

7. As indicated by the Southern California police vernacular of "NHI (no humans involved) Homicide" to describe murders of morally disreputable citizens (Los Angeles Times, 1989; San Diego Union-Tribune, 1992), attributions of moral unworthiness extend even to the most serious crimes.
justice system does not function "properly" lead to cynicism about the utility of vigorous police action.

As levels of deviance in patrol areas increase, police exposure to deviance, its correlates, and criminal justice system "failings" increase. Officers encounter and learn of more crime, more victims, more offenders, and more "unsavory" individuals; they are exposed to higher levels of the social conditions that they know to be correlates of deviance (e.g., dilapidation); and they see more individuals whom they have arrested, or know to have been arrested by fellow officers—individuals who have had charges dropped, those on probation and ex-cons both on and off parole. Thus, with increasing district deviance, officers bring higher levels of cynicism about the usefulness of vigorous action to the negotiating table.

WORKLOAD

The final deviance-driven determinant of work group negotiations is patrol district workload. Even though managers in some larger police agencies try to even-out workload, higher crime districts tend to have higher call-to-officer ratios and, therefore, less officer time is available to handle citizens' complaints. As levels of district deviance increase, in other words, work group capacity to manage work is reduced. Consequently, with higher call averages comes a greater likelihood that districts will have more calls for service than patrol units available. Indeed, in many busy districts calls often are backlogged in dispatch for long stretches of time; citizen requests are held in queue while dispatchers wait for a patrol car to become available (e.g., Los Angeles Times, 1992).

Backlogged work is anathema in organizations because it runs counter to the bureaucratic ideal of efficiency (e.g., Weber, 1946). It is here that the first element exogenous to the patrol work group enters the negotiating process. Skolnick (1966) notes that in police departments the organizational imperative for proficiency is expressed by administrative demands that officers "be efficient" and somehow handle whatever work comes their way. This demand is something that administrators can enforce. While they cannot monitor what officers do in every encounter, administrators can—by simply reading reports of patrol activities—know how well patrol officers are handling their workloads. A backlog of citizen requests for service is evidence that officers are not being efficient, so officers will seek to avoid such backlogs. Thus, with increasing district call loads, officers will feel increasing pressure to manage their work in a timely fashion.

NEGOTIATING RULES

I now turn to specifying how differences in the four properties that lie
on police work group negotiating tables—normal crime, victim deservedness, officer cynicism, and workload—lead to variation in comportment rules across patrol districts.

**Workload**

In the lowest deviance areas there are essentially no resource problems, so officers can usually take as much time as they see fit to handle encounters. As levels of deviance increase and resources become scarce, however, patrol work groups must develop rules that allocate officer time, that is, they must develop prioritization regimens. As levels of deviance increase, more incidents must be pushed to the lower echelons of the prioritization continuum in order to manage increasing workloads. Because making arrests, taking reports, conducting thorough investigations, and so forth, generally consume more officer time than letting suspects go, taking no report, and conducting cursory investigations, officers will respond less vigorously to a larger portion of the deviance spectrum as district deviance increases.

This notion dovetails with the aforementioned “overload hypothesis” in deterrence research (e.g., Geerken and Gove, 1977). It is also anticipated to some degree in police literature that addresses the resource issue at the departmental level. Sherman (1990) argues that police agencies establish triage systems wherein resources are directed toward major crimes because they lack the capacity to respond with vigor to every instance of deviance. Mastrofski et al. (1987) argue further that crime rates and, therefore, resource constraints vary across police agencies so that officers in lower crime jurisdictions devote considerable attention to minor crimes that their busier peers in higher crime departments often ignore (see also, LaFave, 1965; Waegel, 1981).

By recognizing that resources to manage workload differ across districts in large jurisdictions as well as across single-agency districts, the overload hypothesis can be brought into the ecological argument as a powerful structural variable pushing work group rules toward leniency as deviance increases. The idea that resource differentials are the sole source of differences in work group enforcement rules, as suggested by the overload hypothesis, is too narrow, however. Officers' ideas about normal crime, their ideas about victim deservedness, and their degree of cynicism also push work group rules toward leniency for increasingly serious crimes as levels of district deviance increase.

**Normal Crime**

In his seminal work on attributions of normality in the criminal justice system, Sudnow (1965) detailed how criminal court lawyers came to
believe that "normal" crimes merited less stringent sanctions, how those beliefs led to rules affirming the belief, and how the lawyers followed the rules and routinely reduced charges against those arrested for normal crimes through plea bargaining. As Waegel (1981) notes, police officers have attitudes similar to their courtroom peers about sanctions for normal crime; they believe that their legal powers should be used more vigorously against deviant conduct that exceeds the threshold of normality.

Because officers increasingly define more serious deviant acts as normal with increasing district-level deviance, officers in higher crime districts will believe that fewer deviant acts warrant vigorous police intervention than will their peers in lower crime districts. In this way, beliefs about what constitutes normal crime will push the rules in the direction of less vigorous police action for comparatively more serious deviant acts as district deviance increases, a process consistent with the aforementioned "stability of punishment hypothesis." (See Moynihan, 1993, for a general discussion of the process of "defining deviancy down."

Victim Deservedness

Mirroring their emergency room counterparts, police officers believe that crimes involving undeserving victims deserve less vigorous action than crimes involving deserving individuals as victims. Because officers classify more victims as undeserving with increasing district deviance, as deviance goes up, officers will believe that fewer victims deserve vigorous police action. The match between beliefs about action and the need to prioritize is again made, so officers' evaluations of the moral worth of victims will also push the rules in the direction of less vigorous police action for an increasingly larger portion of the deviance spectrum as district deviance increases.

Police Cynicism

Increasing levels of deviance in patrol districts also leads to increasing cynicism. Officers patrolling low-crime districts will see fewer of the indicators of deviance and criminal justice "failure" that cause cynicism about the criminal justice system. As a result, they generally believe that vigorous action in encounters with citizens is an effective way to keep the area relatively free of deviance. In contrast, due to constant exposure to crime, its demographic correlates, and other indicators of criminal justice failure, officers in high-crime districts are quite cynical, believing that crime rates will remain high no matter what they do. In sum, the increase in cynicism also pushes work group rules toward less vigorous action as district deviance increases.
NEGOTIATING ORDER IN PATROL WORK

SPECIFYING THE RULES

While crime rates in territorial units are relatively stable from year to year, there is substantial temporal variation in the incidence of deviant acts in territorial units from minute to minute, hour to hour, and day to day (e.g., Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1993). Two factors, however, suggest that this variation will play a negligible role in the development of work rules. First, officers' notions of normal crime and the deservedness of victims and their levels of cynicism are stable for substantial periods of time. Officers know of the temporal fluctuations in crime but police understandings of district deviance levels—like citizens' understandings of neighborhood crime problems (Skogan, 1986)—are long term.

Second, police work groups will not respond to the periodic dips in workload by sanctioning with more vigor during such periods because they are aware that at any moment the workload could pick up and they would be left with insufficient resources to respond. Just as in any other organizational setting, patrol work groups will seek to husband slack resources in anticipation of periods of higher demands (e.g., Thompson, 1967).

While short-term variation in offending should not play a role in negotiating work group rules, two other crime-related issues will. First, there is a limit to the seriousness of deviant acts for which patrol officers can develop leniency norms—murder. This is due to a second point of coupling between the patrol and administrative sectors of police organizations. Police administrators demand that officers act vigorously when homicides occur. Because it is difficult for patrol officers to hide dead bodies from their superiors, the low visibility that usually insulates them from the administration is stripped away. Thus, no matter how busy the district, no matter how cynical the officers, no matter how routine the homicide, and no matter how undeserving the victim, the rule regarding murder in each and every district will be the same—all murders should receive highly vigorous police action by patrol officers.

The second point is that the proposed conditioning effect of district deviance on rules regarding response to (nonhomicidal) deviance is itself conditional on one feature of specific acts. As Skolnick (1966) notes, officers throughout the United States are very sensitive to danger and, therefore, seek ways to avoid injury. This universal police desire to protect themselves will lead to a norm in every work group that officers take highly vigorous action against citizens whose actions endanger them. No matter how busy the district, no matter how common the crime, and no matter the level of cynicism, acts that place officers in jeopardy are never considered "normal" and the police always view themselves as deserving victims.

With specification of a leniency ceiling at murder, and the caveat that
work group norms will universally espouse that crimes that endanger the
police should be met with substantial vigor, the effect that the forces push-
ing for lenient police action with increasing district deviance will have on
comportment rules across districts can be stated: Except for murder and
crimes that jeopardize officer safety, as district-level rates of crime and other
forms of social deviance increase, work group rules will hold that deviant
acts of a given level of seriousness should receive less vigorous police atten-
tion. Alternatively stated, as district crime rates increase, deviant acts
must be more serious to prompt a given level of police vigor.

NEOTIATED ORDERS AND THE ECOLOGY OF
POLICE BEHAVIOR

The rules negotiated in each patrol district guide police behavior in a
rather straightforward manner. Officers identify the level of deviance in
encounters and determine whether there is a threat to police safety. This,
in turn, identifies for them the appropriate action to take. If officer safety
is threatened, an arrest is made. If officer safety is not an issue, the appro-
riate level of vigor, as defined by negotiated rules for the level of appar-
tent deviance, is identified and the appropriate action taken. By following
comportment rules devised through negotiations with their co-workers,
officers in each district bring a particular order to their dealings with citi-
zens. Across districts, police behavior will vary in the same basic manner
as the variation in the rules: As district-level deviance increases, officers
will respond to a given level of encounter-specific deviance with compar-
avely less vigor, except when officer safety is threatened and when homic-
des occur. As shown in Figure 1, the hypothesized relationship between
encounter-specific deviance and the vigor of police response in districts
with different levels of social deviance can be graphically represented as a
series of curves (with end points at murder) that have increasingly shallow
points of inflection as district deviance increases.

The orders negotiated in each patrol district will thus produce an inverse
relationship between district-level rates of crime and other forms of social
deviance and the vigor of police action across police patrol districts. It
must be kept in mind, however, that as the level of deviance in patrol
districts increases, the seriousness of the matters in which officers inter-
vene increases. Consequently, the mean level of encounter-specific devi-
ance is higher in higher crime districts. Because the vigor of police
response increases with increasing encounter-specific deviance, this will
tend to increase the level of vigor officers use in typical encounters in
higher crime districts. Thus, it is only after the seriousness of deviance in
police-citizen encounters is held constant that police vigor in encounters
with citizens decreases with increasing district deviance.
Figure 1
Relationship Between Seriousness of Immediate Offense and Vigor of Police Action Across Patrol Districts

LOW CRIME DISTRICT

MEDIUM-LOW CRIME DISTRICT

MEDIUM CRIME DISTRICT

MEDIUM-HIGH CRIME DISTRICT

HIGH CRIME DISTRICT
The causal model in Figure 2 summarizes the theory presented in this article. I alert readers to two points about the model: First, the arrow from “Group Rules” that bisects the path between “Seriousness of Crime” and “Vigor of Police Action” represents the conditional effect that work group rules are hypothesized to have on the relationship between the seriousness of crimes in individual encounters and the vigor of police action. Second, the magnitude of the effects of officers’ attitudes (i.e., about normal crime and victim deservedness, and their degree of cynicism) and “Resource Constraints” on “Group Rules” and the magnitude of the effect of rules on the vigor of police action are proposed to be stronger than the effect of encounter-specific criminality on police action. In sum, the theory explains how and why officers working higher crime communities police in a more lenient fashion than their peers in lower crime communities.

**Figure 2**

Causal Model of Police Behavior

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**IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Levels of crime and other forms of social deviance can vary markedly within single patrol districts, as some neighborhoods (e.g., Bursik, 1986; as well as other spatial units such as blocks and individual addresses [see, e.g., Miethe and McDowall, 1993, and Sherman et al., 1989, respectively]) experience more crime than others. While some literature suggests that police officers’ ideas about normal crime and victim deservedness may vary with such subdistrict variation in deviance (Rubinstein, 1973; Waegel, 1981), there are three reasons why police behavior should not vary markedly across the territory of single patrol districts. First, as Rubinstein
(1973; see also above) notes, district boundaries are the primary territorial frame of reference in patrol work. Consequently, while officers are well aware that some places in the districts they patrol are more crime prone than others, their notions of normal crime and victim deservedness pertain primarily to the district level. Second, because single court systems of each given level (e.g., city, county) have jurisdiction over the entire territory of single patrol districts, spatial variation in levels of deviance within districts will not affect police cynicism. Third, because officers are corporately responsible for handling problems throughout the district they patrol, police resources do not vary across the territory of single districts. In sum, because the forces that shape patrol officers' work group rules about vigor operate at the district level, officers in a given district should typically exhibit similar behaviors in similar situations throughout the district.

Within-district variation in crime and other forms of social deviance does, however, have important implications for the emerging study of variability in police behavior across physical space. The limited literature on this topic examines police action in the context of spatial units such as neighborhoods (e.g., Smith, 1986), which are typically smaller than patrol districts. Neighborhoods, however, are not independent spatial entities where police work is concerned. Rather, they are nested within specific patrol districts. Indeed, because district boundaries can bisect single neighborhoods, portions of neighborhoods can be nested in different districts. As a consequence, similar neighborhoods—and segments of bisected ones—can experience different policing, depending on the level of social deviance in the patrol district in which they are situated. Take, for example, police response to two minor assaults occurring in different low-crime neighborhoods (or segments of a bisected one), the first nested in a low-crime district, the second in a high-crime district. Because the officers handling the assault in the first neighborhood (or segment thereof) will be less cynical, view less crime as normal, view victims as more deserving, and have more time on their hands than their peers working the second one, they would typically handle the problem with greater vigor. In sum, the theory I offer indicates that any attempt to understand police behavior in the context of neighborhoods—or any other subdistrict spatial unit—must account for the nature of the patrol district in which they are situated.

The nesting of neighborhoods in police patrol districts also has important implications for understanding neighborhood-level crime patterns. As noted at the outset of this article, through its effect on the operation of local social control mechanisms, crime itself is a crucial determinant of the level of crime that neighborhoods experience (e.g., Bursik, 1986; Schurman and Korbin, 1986; Skogan, 1990; Stark, 1987). The current theory
suggests that the type of patrol district in which neighborhoods are situated will play a critical role in how crime affects them. Because the officers patrolling low-crime neighborhoods in low-crime districts will have the resources and the motivation to respond vigorously to crime, such areas will be policed in a fashion that prevents crime from gaining the foothold that can help transform neighborhoods from low- to high-crime places. On the other hand, because officers patrolling low-crime neighborhoods nested in high-crime districts will police in a lenient fashion, their activities can help transform such low-crime neighborhoods into high-crime enclaves. In a similar vein, lenient police action in high-crime neighborhoods nested in high-crime districts can help sustain high rates of crime in such areas. In sum, the criminal careers that neighborhoods experience can be influenced substantially by the level of social deviance in the patrol district in which they are situated.

To conclude, by specifying how crime and other types of social deviance shape the negotiated orders of police patrol districts, my theory offers fresh insight into police behavior and fills a major gap in the literature on the ecology of crime and control. Moreover, in specifying how the ecological and organizational structures of policing frame work group negotiations, this theory provides a framework for understanding spatial variation in dimensions of police action that it does not explicitly address, such as the use of coercive force, the amount of time officers devote to incidents, and the degree to which officers observe the due process rights of citizens. In sum, the theory has implications well beyond the issue of the application of formal authority by patrol officers.

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