Race, Neighborhood Context, and Drug Enforcement: A Mixed-Method Analysis of Racial Disparities in Drug Arrests

Ph.D. Dissertation

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Abstract

Black-white racial disparities in drug arrests are large and longstanding in the U.S. criminal justice system, as black Americans are arrested for drug offenses at a rate nearly five times the rate of white Americans. Because drug offending data mostly show that blacks are no more likely than whites to use or sell drugs, racial disparities in drug arrests appear to be attributable to factors other than drug offending. This dissertation assesses whether neighborhood contextual factors can explain racial disparities in drug arrests across St. Louis neighborhoods between 2009 and 2013. Using mixed methods, the quantitative and qualitative components test leading explanations of the racial disparity problem: differential drug involvement theory, differential scrutiny theory, and racially-biased policing theory.

The findings refute differential drug involvement theory and show some evidence of differential scrutiny, although differential scrutiny cannot explain the racial disparity in drug enforcement. Instead, the results lend the greatest credence to racially-biased policing theory. Specifically, the multivariate statistical analysis shows that neighborhood racial composition is the strongest predictor of the racial disparity problem, net of neighborhood-level drug problems, violent and property crime, citizen calls for drug service, and social disorganization. Racially-biased drug enforcement manifests as racial incongruity, or "out-of-placeness," as citizens face the greatest risk for drug arrests when their race is incongruent with the neighborhood racial context.

Additionally, a grounded theory analysis of officers' narratives in drug arrest reports reveals qualitative differences in drug enforcement practices across racialized neighborhoods and between blacks and whites. Police tend to use reactive policing to initiate drug arrests in white neighborhoods and of white citizens. In contrast, police tend to use officer-initiated, more invasive policing practices in drug arrests of black citizens and in black and mixed neighborhoods. Officers sometimes justified initiating these proactive encounters based on characteristics of the neighborhood or citizens' demeanor, even when citizens were not engaging in prohibited behaviors. Thus, the excessive use of officer-initiated vehicle and pedestrian stops and officer surveillance of black people and in black and mixed neighborhoods appears to widen the net for blacks as drug arrestees. Findings from this dissertation suggest avenues for future research and have important implications for social change and police reform.