

A Cross-National Theory of Bias-Based Police Profiling

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Word Count: 9011

Biased-based police profiling is a global issue which impacts a diverse set of groups in similar ways. However, explanations of this issue are often limited to single-country analysis and thus fail to clarify why police practices such as ethnic and racial profiling would emerge under varying conditions. By integrating the concepts of Economy of Violence and Practical Ideology, this article explains why police are prone to engage in bias-based profiling across a wide variety of cultural conditions.

Bias-based police profiling—which includes racial, ethnic, and indigenous profiling—has been defined as occurring when officer selection of who to surveil, stop, and/or investigate is based, at least in part, on substituting cues of group identity for cues of criminality (Goodey 2006; Teasley et al 2018: 38). This generally illegal practice is condemned by the United Nations, yet allegations of ethnic and racial profiling continue to emerge regularly around the world amid varying historical, cultural, and economic conditions (Ruteere 2015). Moreover, biased-based profiling could be a contributing factor to the pattern of ethnic and racial overrepresentation in prisons which has been observed in several democracies (Anderson, 2022).

Despite widespread allegations, explanations of biased-based police profiling have tended to focus on specific countries in a case-by-case manner. While single-country analysis makes sense given the severity of carceral development in high-incarcerating countries such as the United States, a case-by-case approach has left bias-based profiling undertheorized as an issue occurring simultaneously in a diverse range of places, and possibly overlooks contributing factors that are common to multiple countries. This article explains why biased-based profiling would routinely occur within policing as it is typically organized and practiced around the world, including the United States, Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere.

I focus on two factors which are common to police forces in general which help explain why bias-based police profiling would be globally pervasive. The first is the typically low ratio of officers to residents within a jurisdiction. The world average police per capita is just 300 officers per 100,000 residents, and I explain how this low ratio produces labor conditions which pressure police to rely on profiling. However, ‘profiling’ is not necessarily based on identarian bias but can also be based on non-ethnoracially discriminatory perception of behavior which indicate threat or lawbreaking. Thus, the question of why police profiling would tend to

generally involve ethnic and/or racial discrimination needs to be addressed. To do so, I employ the concept of “practical ideology” (Parkinson 2021) to clarify how quotidian and cross-culturally accepted precepts of criminal justice blur the distinction between building suspicion based on observing likely criminal behavior and building suspicion based on perceiving particular individuals as likely criminal.

Though I highlight specific factors which pressure and encourage police around the world to engage in bias-based profiling, I also acknowledge that individual officers possess agency and varying degrees of ethnoracial consciousness. That is, while policing as a profession is generally prone to bias-based practices due to the factors I identify, individual officers may resist (or embrace) this tendency. However, resistance may come at personal and professional cost.

LITRATURE REVIEW

Biased Police Profiling is Global

Bias-based profiling by police has been evidenced in a great many countries, including the United States (Pierson et al 2020), Brazil (Cano 2010), England and Wales (Borooah 2011), France (Jobard and Lévy 2009), Germany (Bruce-Jones 2015), the Nordic Countries (Solhjell et al 2019), Australia (O’Brien, G. 2021), and South Africa (Diphorn 2017). Indeed, evidence of ethnic and racial police profiling appears to permeate most if not the entirety of the “Western” world (Gau & Brunson 2015). Single-country analyses of the issue tend to uncover similar patterns in which members of stigmatized or otherwise marginalized ethnic, racial, or indigenous groups experience disproportionate unwanted contact with patrolling police. This pattern

typically corresponds with the overrepresentation of such groups in a country's prisons. Indeed, ethnic, racial, and indigenous overrepresentation in prisons has been observed in at least 19 democracies, including some often-overlooked European examples such as Norway, Switzerland, and Ireland, and the understudied example of India (Anderson 2022). However, the issue of bias-based police profiling is not confined to the Western world. Evidence suggests ethnic and racial profiling occurs in the People's Republic of China (Roberts 2018; Healy 2021), Japan (Arudou 2021, 137), Russia (Kuznetsova and Round 2018), and Nigeria (Oladipo 2013), for example. The extent of single-country analyses demonstrates that bias-based police profiling appears to be occurring under a wide array of cultural and economic conditions.

The sheer pervasiveness of evidence suggesting biased police profiling is a feature of so many varied places has led at least one scholar to ask why “police worldwide continue to reproduce race, racism and ethnic conflicts even as more members from historically stigmatized groups participate in policing, and as states adopt explicitly post-colonial, anti-racist policy agendas?” (Amar 2009). Single-country analyses tend to explain routine ethnic and racial police profiling as the consequence of a country's unique history, economy, and/or culture. I do not intend to dispute such findings; however, the widely distributed pattern of evidence is suggestive of transnational factors which single-country analyses are prone to overlook. Such factors may include transnational anti-black racism and persistent Afrophobia (Kerrigan 2015). While anti-black racism is pertinent to the study of biased policing in countries such as the United States (Lavalley and Johnson 2020), Canada (Maynard 2017), and Brazil (Alves 2018), it is less so in other countries where biased profiling is nonetheless observed to unfold in similar ways. Thus, further examination of potential transnational factors which may contribute to biased police profiling under varying national conditions is warranted.

Prior Explanations of Biased Police Profiling as Cross-National Phenomenon

Bias-based police profiling, especially racial profiling, has received a great deal of scholarly attention for several decades and space does not permit a full exposition of this research or the scholarly debate over the issue. Much of this work has focused on conscious and unconscious racial prejudice among officers and how public policy such as uncritical use of crime statistics and drug wars enable and/or encourage officer prejudice (Blanks 2015; Oliver 1999; Gau 2013; Epp et al 2014; Johnson 2009; Alexander 2020; Quattlebaum 2018; Miller 2007; Goodey 2006; Gounev and Bezlov 2006; Harris 2006). While enlightening, this scholarship examines bias-based police profiling using single-country analysis and offers little clarity on why biased profiling would unfold similarly in so many varied places. It is worth considering that police in varying places may engage in biased profiling for the same or similar reasons, as findings in this direction may help clarify what is or is not achievable through reforms such as anti-bias trainings and increased officer oversight. Thus, I will review some of the previous research which attempts to explain why ethnic and racial police profiling would occur across various contemporary cultures. This work has primarily emerged from Marxist and critical criminological analysis of the unofficial role police play in perpetuating inequalities under capitalism.

For example, Chambliss and Seidman (1971) argue that criminal-legal systems may be manipulated by socioeconomic elites to target politically powerless individuals, which in a racialized society are disproportionately likely to be members of historically marginalized minority groups. This process involves implicit goal substitution, in which the official goal of police to suppress crime is substituted for the more politically expedient goal of suppressing the crimes of those generally excluded from political participation and the opportunity to influence

public budgets (287). That is, police administrators, and even rank-and-file officers, understand that investigating and penalizing politically powerful individuals could result in a backlash against police among the dominant class, thereby endangering the financial resources and political clout police depend upon to sustain their organizations (Turk 1969; Quinney 1970). “Therefore”, explain Petrocellia, Piquero, and Smith (2003), “it may be expected that law enforcement agencies will process a disproportionately high number of the politically weak and powerless, while ignoring the violations of those with power” (2). Among the consequences of this dynamic is a preoccupation among police with members of disadvantaged and stigmatized groups who remain critically underrepresented in positions of public authority (Blalock 1967). The conditions which allow for this process—racial and ethnic political and socio-economic exclusion—are common the world over and thus this explanation of biased police profiling has justifiable cross-national applicability.

Critical Race theorists interpret this process as not only about the politics of resource allocation but also about the centrality of racism in capitalist societies. As Richard Delgado (2007) describes, a banal and “ordinary” racism can permeate the process of cultural reproduction within a country by masquerading as common sense (136–137). For example, Delgado (1994) and Chiricos and Eschholz (2002) describe the social construction of threat in the United States, in which Americans are conditioned by media depictions to understand street crime as the most clear and present danger they may face, and in turn, to associate street crime with black, brown, and primarily male bodies. This knowledge formation occurs at the intersection of media depictions which reinforce racist criminal stereotypes and the enactment of criminal laws which reinforce a sense of threat regarding interpersonal violence while distracting from the more relevant threat to wellbeing of “white-collar” crime and military actions (Delgado

1994, 543–548). Thus, a media reinforced condition of “racial threat” can influence officer discretion resulting in disproportionate police contact with members of stigmatized minority groups (Welch 2007). As negative stereotyping in the media is a globally widespread issue, it is conceivable that some degree of biased police profiling across the globe is the byproduct of media messages about who is, and who is not, a threat.

To sum, most analyses of racial profiling do not attempt to draw parallels between the profiling occurring in multiple places and instead opt for a case-by-case approach. However, I have provided a partial review of how globally pervasive social inequality and conflict may play a role in influencing police discretion. Specific mechanisms may include the exclusion of groups from positions of political authority and/or cultural conditions of racial threat perpetuated by media.

That said, there are also widespread commonalities among police forces themselves which engender bias-based profiling, and these have tended to be overlooked. Although there is important variation in policing styles, capacities, and priorities (Bayley 1990), variations in policing are intelligible as variations on a theme. This theme includes elements of economized violence and quotidian rationales for legal violence which affirm popular sovereignty. I interrogate this theme to uncover institutionally endemic roots of bias-based police profiling.

POLICE AS AN ECONOMY OF VIOLENCE: THE INEVITABILITY OF PROFILING

Sheldon Wolin (2016) coined the term “economy of violence” to clarify the assumption in political realism that violence is inextricable from politics and must therefore be carefully managed by governments to produce stability. Examining Machiavelli’s political thought specifically, Wolin discerns the intention to economize the violence presumed inherent to any

political community. This is done, as Wolin reads Machiavelli, by determining the correct proportion of violence to apply such that the State neither instigates widespread resistance nor appears weak and invites challenge. This approach to the strategic use of violence differs from one in which violence is deployed to be overwhelming and decisive in the short term, such as in outright war. Instead, a long-term view is adopted such that the State employs a “science of the controlled application of force” (198). The economy of violence concept has been used to analyze various social issues, including punishments (Jeffreys 2013), enslavement (Bakare-Yusuf 2017), patriarchy (True 2012), and contemporary colonization (Plasse-Couture 2013). In each of these analyses, the authors observe both strategic ruthlessness and restraint in the use of violence to regulate the routines of life and sustain social inequalities.

Few institutions better embody economized violence than the police, and this can begin to be discerned by considering that the world average police-per-capita hovers at just 300 law enforcers for every 100,000 residents (UNODC 2010: 19). For example, every country belonging to the G20 and European Union maintains approximately between 130 and 500 officers per 100,000 residents. This represents a remarkably tight range of officers policing 2/3rds of the world’s population. That is, police the world over are deployed strategically such that they are neither a burdensome presence for a country’s majority nor so limited in number as to suggest a weak and vulnerable state. However, 300, or even 1000, officers cannot possibly deter, surveil, interdict, or respond to the potential and diverse crimes of 100,000 persons, even with significant aid from the community. Rather, police can only hope to prevent a fraction of the lawbreaking which surrounds them, and only arrest a fraction of the lawbreakers which attempt to elude them. This is paradoxical: on the one hand, ‘crime’ is a highly salient political issue in urbanized societies, irrespective of actual crime rates (Shi, Lu, and Pickett 2020). Yet publics generally

accept or desire a limited presence of police in daily life. Police may be thought of as serving a “crime control” purpose; yet, preventing and addressing lawbreaking is clearly economized such that daily life, at least for the majority, is not overly inconvenienced by police presence. Hence, police represent an economy of violence.

Another way to understand police as an economy of violence is through the criminological concept of police legitimacy. Police legitimacy is based on the notion that “the police need public support and cooperation to be effective in their order-maintenance role”, and that “they particularly benefit when they have the voluntary support and cooperation of most members of the public, most of the time” (Tyler 2004). The two greatest threats to police legitimacy are perceptions among the public that the police engage in excessive force and/or treat people unfairly (Bottoms and Tankebe 2017). The concept of police legitimacy unintentionally exposes the idea that coercive force must be employed with thoughtful restraint to be effective in maintaining order over the long-term. This suggests an awareness, even if only implied, that an economy of violence is crucial to legal authority, and that police—the most publicly visible of officials in daily life—must adhere to an economy of violence principle lest they contribute to conditions which undermine State authority.

This helps explain, in part, why police forces around the world are deployed in such limited numbers and clarifies why the concept of police legitimacy is typically tethered to concepts of social order and citizen obedience. Furthermore, as the following argues, understanding police as an economy of violence helps clarify why profiling is central to police work.

The Reasonable Officer

As an economy of violence, police are limited in various ways, both in terms of their numbers and by the pressure to preserve their own and the state's legitimacy in the eyes of the majority. The practice of profiling is a "practical," though deeply problematic and self-serving adaptation of police to the limitations imposed upon their profession by the economization of state violence. Further, the centrality of profiling in police work positions officers at the threshold of identarian discrimination. To examine why this is true, I utilize the American legal concept of the "reasonable officer" to guide a thought experiment focusing upon the exigencies of patrol.

The concept of the reasonable officer is crucial to the American judiciary's current regulation of policing, acting as the imaginary "control" with which to test the legality of questionable police conduct. For US courts, the reasonable officer is conceived as an agent utilizing imperfect information in a complex world who must necessarily employ discretionary violence to enforce the law and who strives to do so in a legitimate manner according to their training (Alpert 1994). Police conduct is therefore judged according to what an officer should have known given their situational awareness and training at a discreet moment in time rather than all they could have known at that same moment.

The reasonable officer may be an American juridical construction, yet the concept comports with a widespread attempt to regulate legal violence while acknowledging officer fallibility (Walsh and Conway 2011, 71). Therefore, the concept of the reasonable officer can be a useful tool for analyzing contemporary policing across countries, especially when considering the use of discretion under the limitations of an economy of violence.

The Reasonable Officer on Patrol

Modern police have two primary modes: patrol and response. Patrol has been a mainstay of policing since the inception of centrally organized policing organizations. Louis XIV of France, who oversaw what many argue to be the first modern police force, defined the purpose of patrol as “ensuring the peace and quiet of the public and of private individuals, purging the city of what may cause disturbances, procuring abundance, and having each and every one live according to their station and their duties” (Riley 1983). As a practice and intention, patrol has changed very little since the first uniformed officer walked the frenetic Parisian streets of the 17th century. Thus, imagine the reasonable officer is on patrol.

The identity characteristics of the reasonable officer are irrelevant in this exercise—unimagine their sex, gender, ability, skin color, accent, or body type—the reasonable officer is reducible to a uniform and a set of tools. Now the reasonable officer can be viewed, unencumbered, as the physical manifestation of criminal justice’s overriding official goal: the defense of the public from crime according to the law.

In this mission, the reasonable officer must employ their senses, intuition, social knowledge, and prior experience in the search for threats to society. Sensory stimuli are paramount, however, as policing is a particularly ocular and auditory profession, dependent upon sensory cues, signifiers, and pattern recognition. Some crimes are obvious—daring daylight bank robberies; assaults on a crowded street corner; open public drug use; etcetera. However, much of the behavior society can and does deem criminal is easily concealed and easily perpetrated. This is especially true for crimes of possession, including possession of illicit substances, weapons, and outstanding warrants; these are crimes for which there is typically no conspicuous, sensory evidence. Yet the reasonable officer must rely on their senses to root out these “invisible crimes” and this poses a significant challenge. Senses can be augmented by the use of technology and

animals; however, the reasonable officer must still choose when and how these enhancements are utilized, which, again, depends on their limited capacity to anticipate and detect crime. We may tend to think of crimes of possession as a relatively recent addition to criminal law, however even in the days of Louis XIV, police were tasked with rooting out easily concealed possessory violations, ranging from illicit protestant bibles to political pamphlets to small arms (Clément 1866). The patrol has always involved a hunt for crimes in the shadows, and thus always necessitated a certain cunning.

Thus, the reasonable officer, like their historical and contemporary real-life counterparts, must rely on an array of subtle cues, often visual, to navigate urban modernity and enforce law. The task of interdicting any crime, and especially crimes of possession, is overwhelming; law enforcers, amid a finitude of time and energy, have everyone, and thus no one, to suspect.

Profiling is the primary way in which police filter overwhelming sensory information into digestible data points. In target-rich environments, the reasonable officer must pick among many potential targets and utilize some kind of selection method to produce manageable categorizations of suspicion. Appearance is generally the first set of cues available to the patrolling reasonable officer; it is thus easy to understand why appearance-based profiling would be routine. Our unchosen appearances—phenotype, body type, decrepitude—may be perceived as “honest indicators” of potential threat. So too can our chosen appearances be interpreted as threatening, perhaps as cues of affiliation or social status. Thus, the inherently ocular character of profiling involves a constant temptation to construct suspicion based on visible social categories such as race, gender, and ability.

Apart from appearance, the remaining cues available to the reasonable officer are behavioral. Again, the reasonable officer must rely on their senses and interpret potentially

complex and unclear meanings from a variety of stimuli. This is where the selection method of pattern recognition is emphasized. Officers may consider if the observed behavior seems normal and appropriate to the context, or if appearance—as the reasonable officer interprets it—correlates with behavior and place. Here too, the reasonable officer must resist constructing suspicion based on information which does not in actuality predict threat, such as ethnicity and race (Schafer et al 2006; Warren 2009; Devery 2010).

However, sensory interpretation of our social world is unavoidably processed through a cultural lens and impacted by processes such as social conditioning. Any law enforcer inevitably traverses a multitude of evolving cultural narratives that may lead them astray and waste precious time and resources (Smith and Alpert 2007). This is why astute drug cartels take advantage of the police reliance on profiling by employing individuals to smuggle contraband that officers tend to overlook, such as women of the racial or ethnic majority, children, and the elderly (Fleetwood 2014).

However, without social conditioning, the target rich milieu of the patrol would be paralyzing, devoid of cultural meanings by which to navigate a complex social world. Imagine being tasked with patrolling a society that is utterly alien; roaming urban modernity without semiotic bearings; left culturally adrift and tasked with deciding when, where, and how to intervene in an unfamiliar social life. Without cultural meanings, the policed environment would be a deluge of unsystematized and incomprehensible information.

Thus, profiling cannot be a culture-blind practice—the patrol requires cultural literacy—and this places officers at the threshold of identarian discrimination. Indeed, profiling of any kind is necessarily discriminatory in that it is a process of selection. Officers on patrol cannot avoid confronting the culture in which they are embedded and thus seeing differences

among persons which have been constructed to signify ascriptive and typically hierarchized categories of race, ethnicity, indigeneity, and other identities. The reasonable officer is trained to not act in response to differences in identity, yet identities cannot be unseen once they have entered the officer's mind, meaning that a sense of identity is never fully removed from an officer's decisions. Thus, it can be appreciated how close the discriminatory lens of profiling is to the discriminatory lens of bias.

The following makes the case that police profiling is not merely approximate to bias but indeed predisposed to be based on bias. The key to this argument is considering not who police notice and why, but rather who police are more likely to *ignore* and why. This is clarified by looking at the "practical ideology" which permeates the modern policing profession.

PRACTICAL IDEOLOGY AND BIAS-BASED PROFILING

Practical Ideology

The concept of "practical ideology" is explained by Parkinson's (2020) ethnographic study of various militant groups in Palestine. The puzzle Parkinson addresses is that "members of militant organizations frequently act in ways that diverge from what seem like foundational ideological commitments", yet militants still strongly identify with the group they belong to and support the official goals their group is explicitly committed to. Parkinson seeks to understand the role that ideology plays in "militant groups and among their supporters when it is not deeply studied, internalized, or sincerely believed" (53).

Central to unraveling this puzzle is a reconsideration of the concept of "ideology". Typically, ideology is thought of as formal doctrine, that is, "specific published political positions, platforms, or plans" which determine the worldviews of members within distinct

political organizations (60). However, Parkinson observes that a process of internalizing doctrine is unnecessary to maintaining actual group cohesion or regulation of behavior. For example, members of the militant groups Parkinson studies strongly distinguish themselves from members of other groups, and respect their relative chain of command, while at the same time displaying flexibility in their own values and private lives.

This paradox leads Parkinson toward a more expansive understanding of ideology which includes “everyday principles, ideas, and social heuristics that reflect relational (that is, socially situated) worldviews” (60). This “practical” ideology influences group behavior, reinforces group solidarity, and is tacitly accepted and encouraged by group leadership precisely because of the organizing utility it serves. Examples of practical ideology include “everyday”, easily accessible tenets, such as ‘those people are immoral’, which allow members and supporters to rhetorically and behaviorally perform commitment without demanding that they clearly demonstrate sincere indoctrination by being fully transparent regarding their own lifestyles and beliefs (61). These small, routine performances of commitment amount to an informal socialization which reinforces group affiliation and constrains individual expression and behavior. The concept of practical ideology helps explain teamwork and political identity without presuming ideological mind control. Practical ideology sustains militant groups, and furthers their agendas, without imposing burdensome personal sacrifices upon members and risking defections. In this way, “practical ideology” is an *economy of ideology*.

The Practical Ideology of Policing: The Criminal Justice Paradigm

Similar to the militant organization of Parkinson’s research, the police—as a profession and community—make use of a specific practical ideology. The practical ideology of policing contains messages about which kinds of people are appropriate to overlook during patrol and

which kinds of persons can be trusted during response, therein turning suspicion toward identities which differ from the presumed trustworthy group. Such messages need not be fully internalized by police to be significant; they simply lessen the burdens of police labor and thus entice officers to utilize them. In doing so, the practical ideology of policing pushes profiling, which is already vulnerable to stereotyping, further toward being a bias-based practice.

Prior scholarship has already identified a suitable designation for this practical ideology: the “criminal justice paradigm” (Mathiesen 2014). This term primarily appears in the works of critical criminologists and penal abolitionists who mean to deconstruct the fundamental assumptions, concepts, and rationales of criminal justice as a social science and State enterprise.

The criminal justice paradigm is based on the following tenets: 1) ‘crime’ is defined as an offense against society, for which an individual is responsible, that consists of breaking the law 2) governments represent society at large and thus bear the right and obligation to intervene in the event of lawbreaking 3) formal intervention shall proceed according to a division of administrative labor such that State violence is not the purview of any single individual 4) punishment is obligatory in light of conviction and justified according to the philosophies of deterrence, incapacitation, retribution, and rehabilitation.

These tenets are rarely spelled out in national constitutions yet can be readily found elsewhere in official statements. For example, the US Bureau of Justice Statistics states on its *What is Criminal Justice?* Website that “crimes against an individual are crimes against the State” and that “individuals [are prosecuted] as though they victimized all of society.” Scholarship discussing the criminal justice paradigm has often sought to challenge the assumption that its tenets represent a rational response to a purportedly timeless, apolitical and

naturally occurring social problem called ‘crime’ (Hulsman 1986). Coyle and Schept (2017) summarize:

The historical and social production of ‘crime’ has fabricated a theory, a set of practices, and a dominant discourse that is collectively understood as the paradigm of ‘criminal justice’. This paradigm recognizes only a trifle of transgressions humans complete, labels these chosen transgressions as ‘crimes,’ and names their chosen actors ‘criminals’. In time, a sprawling ‘criminal justice’ system has been produced, and it is recognizable as the penal process through which ‘criminals’ traverse from law, to police, to court and finally to prison (399).

In this view, the concept of the “criminal justice paradigm” refers to a sort of institutional blueprint which serves as the guiding basis and justification for legal violence in popular sovereignty-based political systems (Coyle 2013). This blueprint allows for variation in law enforcement procedures, priorities, and severity of punishments, yet it constrains the range of possibilities such that criminal-legal systems in general share a sort of institutional “DNA”. This means criminal-legal systems across the globe are more similar than different. That is, countries have generally based their approaches to the issue of crime on a single model, and the notion of a criminal justice paradigm is a means to analyze that model at its most fundamental level.

The origins of the criminal justice paradigm are distinctively European, and its development was an iterative process involving emulation and ideational dispersal across various European cultures and eventually, through colonialism, to the rest of the world (Vogler 2017). As such, the criminal justice paradigm has many local variations, yet they each build upon a shared theoretical, practical, and discursive foundation which emphasizes State dominance on behalf of popular sovereignty through institutionalized violence. Space does not permit a full

exposition of the criminal justice paradigm, or a full accounting of the many critiques leveled against it. Instead, the remainder of this section will focus on the aspects of the criminal justice paradigm which are most significant in explaining bias-based police profiling, specifically how the concept of ‘crime’ is conceived within a criminal justice-oriented worldview and how police may use this understanding of ‘crime’ as a practical ideology in response to the exigencies of their profession.

‘Crime’

At the core of the criminal justice paradigm is a single, seemingly simplistic idea: that ‘crime’ is properly understood as an injury to society. This definition is conventionally presented as a logical and benign expression of popular sovereignty; however, I argue that this definition of ‘crime’ offers law enforcers a subtle invitation to engage in ethnic, racial, and indigenous discrimination while engaging in the professional necessity of profiling.

Before proceeding, it is important to point out that there is nothing inevitable about this definition of crime; alternatives have existed and currently exist. For example, European medieval criminal law saw little distinction between a ‘crime’ and a ‘sin’, that is, an offense to God(s). Consequently, ecclesiastical authority was heavily involved in criminal disputes, which to modern secular sensibilities would present as highly inappropriate (Shoemaker 2011). Today, restorative justice theorists advocate for an alternative definition of crime that focuses on demonstrable harm done to persons rather than legal violations. The implication is that the harm of crime is properly addressed by a process of healing rather than punishment (Zehr 1994). Suffice to say, ‘crime’ is a socially constructed and historically contingent concept which legitimates certain kinds of authority.

As such, the conventional criminal justice definition of ‘crime’ legitimates the violence of the modern popular sovereign and its state representatives on grounds that individual violations of law constitute a collective injury which only governments have the authority to address (Barnett 1977: 287). This logic is based on the idea that individual crimes “strike at the very being of society” by undermining the collective benefit of the law (Duff 2007: 52). Indeed, there is good reason to regard crime as a public matter; the consequences of victimization are rarely, if ever, confined to a single person. And if the aspiration of the law is to establish a predictable and secure social life, then violations of law defy that aspiration and conceivably threaten social cohesion. However, the assumptions underlying the conventional criminal justice definition of ‘crime’ belie the fact that societies are typically rife with crime, and that contemporary governments are powerless to prevent and punish all but a fraction of the crime occurring at any given time. Nonetheless, societies endure. This suggests that the criminal justice paradigm overstates the threat of ‘crime’ (Young 1999; Husak 2008; Sheldon and Sheldon 2018). Therefore, the ‘crime’ of the criminal justice perspective should be understood as an ideological construct, or perhaps more accurately, what Armstrong (1973) calls a *belief*—a cognitive device by which we navigate the maelstrom of life (109). Fittingly, officers may use this belief about ‘crime’ to navigate the challenges of patrol, specifically in determining who to *ignore* while searching for crime. The following explains.

Defending Society from ‘Crime’

The job of patrolling officers is to deter and detect crime, and this difficult task is made easier by the definition of ‘crime’ as an injury to a presumed law-abiding and thus deserving collective. This perspective positions lawbreakers and the deserving collective as mutually defining opposites; society is figured as blameless and victimized—that is, pure—in contrast to

the offender, who is figured as a contaminant to be removed. This sort of logic is described by Melamed (2011) as a “conceptual bind”, that is, a system “made up of two distinct concepts that condition the meaning of one another and act together to unify and police the boundaries of an episteme or structure of knowledge” (187). When concepts are “bound” they produce meanings through their relationship; the significance is in the whole and not the parts.

As a conceptual bind, the seemingly simplistic logic that ‘crime’ injures ‘society’ produces a complex set of social and moral assumptions, including the notion that the deserving collective is entitled to government protection precisely because it does not include the criminal element which police are tasked with rooting out. That is, this logic implies the existence of morally incongruent categorical distinctions among the populace. This serves as a practically employable quotidian principle to facilitate profiling: the conventional definition of ‘crime’ implies that it is morally acceptable and rational to act as if the majority, who logically must constitute the deserving collective, is composed of persons who are likely above suspicion. This reinforces a habitual disinterest in persons who officers superficially regard as full-fledged, unambiguous members of the deserving collective they are employed to defend.

But who, exactly, belongs to this deserving collective? As an abstraction, the deserving collective is absent any concrete identifiable characteristics. However, patrolling target-rich urban modernity practically demands that the notion of a deserving collective take on a mind’s eye semblance of a specific categorical distinction. After all, profiling depends on selective ignoring of most persons, and the most efficiently employable filter would be one which excludes a larger category of persons.

Thus, an expedient method to determine who comprises the deserving collective is to rely on already established categorical distinctions which circulate within the culture the officer

navigates. This is about *positive stereotypes*. Modern nation-states, politically liberal and otherwise, are organized around a central ethnic or racial group which dominate positions of economic, political, and cultural authority, even when formal equality is touted as a national value (Gillis 1994). Examples include whites in the United States and other European-founded settler societies, Han in China, the various dominant ethnicities of Europe, Brancos (whites) in Brazil, Hausa and Fulani in Nigeria, and so on. Such groups have been elevated in national discourse as providing the heroic founders, liberators, or civilizers of the land—and lionized as such in monuments, holidays, and public education. These groups enjoy the status of *default identity*, that is, they accord with routine expectation of who a random person from the country is supposed to be.

Members of the default identity are more likely regarded as unambiguous members of the deserving collective and thus those police are tasked with defending from ‘crime’. As such, members of the default identity are more likely to be regarded as *disinteresting* to police while on patrol. *This amounts to a bias*. This bias precedes and structures the more directed biases which are typically associated with racial and ethnic profiling, such as specific anti-black bias. With the default identity subject to a baseline of non-interfering amity, officers create space and focus with which to construct suspicion of racial and ethnic others who comprise the cognitive “leftovers” of the initial profiling process.

Adopting this view does not require that officers devote themselves to the study of criminal justice theory—practical ideology is an invitation, not mind control. Further, the logic of the criminal justice paradigm may be repelled, as can any ideology. An officer can endeavor to profile while strictly limiting their selection criteria through self-enforced identity-blindness. However, costs for the officer are anticipated as both the practical incentives and ideological

pressures work against such an approach to police work. This is because resisting the criminal justice paradigm makes the patrol more cognitively arduous; an officer would simultaneously have to discern the subtleties of various crimes amid potentially overwhelming sensory information and unsee the identities which their culture has so fastidiously trained them to notice. This requires significant awareness in terms of situation and self, which is a daunting proposition given the unpredictable milieu of the street. Officers have agency, yet the pressures and incentives surrounding their profession are significant.

A Cross-National Theory of Bias-Based Police Profiling

The preceding analyses may be integrated to generate a cross-national theory of bias-based police profiling. As an institutionalization of the economy of violence principle, police must be present in social life but not so intrusive that they become regarded as unambiguous symbols of oppression by the majority. This means that police are significantly outnumbered in the target-rich environments of urban modernity, where they necessarily rely on selection bias to help determine their use of discretion. The process of selection begins with a practical cognitive short-cut of deciding what sensory information should be ignored. The most practical use of systematic ignoring is to overlook information which seems normal—this predisposes officers to overlook racial and ethnic majorities, who by virtue of their numerousness determine a culture’s collective sense of normality. Further, profiling cannot be a culturally-objective process to function—police must know the culture in which they are embedded and this means knowing cultural narratives which typically include dehumanizing depictions of visibly distinct groups. Police are uniquely positioned to act on their bias and cannot merely avoid members of groups to which they respond negatively. Thus, the necessity of profiling places officers at the threshold of identarian discrimination.

The criminal justice paradigm then works to push profiling toward discrimination. The logic of the criminal justice paradigm is that a deserving collective is the primary recipient of governments' protection from 'crime'. Crime is conceived as the byproduct of moral outsiders—criminals—who have intruded upon society and must be rooted out. This worldview encourages police to see society as composed of a law-abiding and non-threatening majority that has been infiltrated by a dangerous minority. Such a view justifies the systematic ignoring necessary to engage in profiling. However, for systematic ignoring to proceed, police must first have a sense of who comprises the deserving collective. The most prominent candidates are groups regarded as the default identity of a country, which is often a racial or ethnic group but may also be a religious majority or caste. These are the groups which have benefitted from pervasive and oft repeated narratives of their purportedly unparalleled contribution to the founding, liberating, and/or civilizing of the land. The association between a default national identity and the criminal justice conception of a deserving collective therein contributes to a positive bias, which influences who police will tend to ignore while scanning the public for criminal activity. The base-line tendency of police to generally ignore persons who appear to represent a default identity predisposes police to engage in discriminatory construction of suspicion. This predisposition is likely exacerbated by national histories of colonialism, genocide, and enslavement, which produce legacies of intergenerational mistrust and ongoing social conflict that fuels the negative stereotyping and economic disparities briefly discussed in the literature review.

A PRELIMINARY CASE STUDY

Evidence from numerous single-country studies suggests that a diverse range of ethnic, racial, and indigenous groups are profiled in a wide array of countries, yet multiple groups are

rarely brought together under a single analytical framework to help clarify why dissimilar groups have a similar experience with police profiling. One such example of a group which experiences racial profiling are the Roma and Sinti peoples of Europe. To further demonstrate my cross-national theory, I will focus on racial profiling of Roma in Latvia and argue that while conditions unique to Latvia are important in explaining the issue, general and transnational characteristics of the modern police are crucial factors.

Several studies establish the motive underlying the targeting of Roma by police—pervasive anti-Roma sentiment—yet they do not convincingly clarify the mechanisms by which anti-Roma sentiment becomes routine racial profiling. Specifically, the studies do not fully explain why so many police would routinely act on the same motive beyond assertions that Latvian police in general are racist. The problem with this assumption is that it is practically impossible to prove conscious or unconscious discrimination without “smoking gun” evidence, leaving allegations of racial profiling vulnerable to easy dismissal. My theory clarifies how cultural prejudices influence police patrol tactics without relying on the assumption that police internalize specific anti-minority sentiments. The implications of this preliminary case study are that the modern police, as a globally pervasive meta-type of public institution and profession, are inherently prone to selection bias while on patrol due to the interaction of police labor conditions and the most basic rationales for legal violence in a popular sovereignty-based regime.

Background

In 2016, Roma comprised 4% of Latvia’s incarcerated population but just 0.3% of Latvia’s general population (Anderson 2022). This level of overrepresentation suggests, but does not confirm, that Roma may be routinely racially profiled and/or be disproportionately involved in criminal activity. Certainly, Europe’s long history of anti-Roma sentiment fits with a

contemporary condition in which Roma are either targeted by police and/or economically excluded, both of which may contribute to their overrepresentation in Latvia's prisons. Specifically, Roma and Sinti peoples have been an ethnic minority in Europe for over 600 years and a historical target of discrimination, coercive state management, and outright genocide (Law and Zakharov 2019). Roma and Sinti peoples have also been racialized, that is, subject to a dehumanizing discursive and legal process asserting their hereditary inferiority in relation to a purportedly superior counterpart group (Bancroft 2005). This racialization persists as a "pariah" status throughout Europe, including in Latvia (Waluszko 2020). Currently, ethnic profiling by police of Roma and Sinti peoples is a known issue in multiple European countries (Hera 2017; Gounev and Bezlov 2006; Costas 2005).

This background establishes a motive for Latvian police to engage in racial profiling of Roma, and indeed, the European Network Against Racism (ENAR) states that "existing evidence...reveal signs of racial profiling" in the Latvian Republic (Djackova 2006, 18). One way to explain this is to assert that Latvian police generally act upon anti-Roma prejudice. However, this assertion is difficult to prove. Another way to explain pervasive racial profiling of Roma is to consider Latvian police as an economy of violence guided by the criminal justice paradigm.

Why Latvian Police Profile Roma

According to the official Latvian State Police website, Latvia has a police-per-capita of 296 officers per 100,000 people, which is essentially the world average.¹ Thus, there is little reason to believe that Latvian police have an altogether different labor experience compared to police elsewhere. That is, like police around the world, Latvian officers patrol target-rich urban

environments and necessarily rely on a selection method to manage discretionary action, that is, profiling. Importantly, the profiling process begins with a sense of who to ignore.

In Latvia, as in many other countries, the criminal justice paradigm offers implicit guidance as to who should be ignored by patrolling officers. The official Latvian State Police websites echoes the foundation of the criminal justice paradigm by declaring that “Latvian State Police is a state institution to *protect the State and society* from criminal and other illegal threats to life, health, rights and freedoms, property and interests” [italics added].ⁱⁱ From a shallow point of view, individuals perceived as ethnic Latvians are the most probable members of the “society” Latvian police have the duty to protect and thus are more likely to be regarded as disinteresting to patrolling officers. This baseline selection bias paves the way for police attention to be focused on individuals who appear “non-Latvian”, such as members of Latvia’s Roma minority who are stereotyped according to phenotype, dress, and dialect (Plájás, M’charek, and van Baar 2019). Add to this that Roma are often unfairly maligned in Latvia, and it is perhaps of little surprise that Latvian officers would be quick to over-focus on individuals they perceive as Roma while confronted with a deluge of potential targets to investigate. Any implicit or explicit racial preference among officers would simply attenuate this process. Latvian officers may resist the pressure to racially profile, however doing so would make the patrol more intellectually arduous.

Hence, an economy of violence—the police—intersects with a practical ideology—the criminal justice paradigm—to create conditions under which Latvian police are prone to come into disproportionate coercive contact with members of Latvia’s Roma minority. All that is needed for the process to begin is a baseline selection bias to ignore an ethnic or racial majority. The labor conditions and practical ideology of modern policing encourage this baseline bias.

CONCLUSION

Given growing evidence of ethnic and racial profiling around the world, one approach to explaining this pattern is to consider general features of modern police as they are typically implemented in most countries. Even in the absence of a country's unique conditions, my argument exposes how the typical labor conditions experienced by police and the beliefs which justify legal violence can contribute to bias-based profiling. If societies are to effectively address the issue of bias-based police profiling, they may have to be willing to consider not only the country-specific factors that contribute to the issue but also the general exigencies of police labor and the subtle role of widespread and often uncritically accepted cross-cultural beliefs about 'crime'.

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ⁱ The English language version may be accessed at <https://www.vp.gov.lv/en/state-police-latvia>

ⁱⁱ Ibid