District-Level Divergences: Pressures, Perceptions, and Practices in Police Response to Calls for Service

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ABSTRACT: Much research on policing focuses on formal law enforcement actions. While patterns in arrest and citation structure systemic disparities, responses to calls for service that do not end in formal social control continue to constitute the bulk of police work and convey meaningful messages about citizenship to those the police encounter. This paper investigates policing practices in two adjacent police districts in a highly segregated city. Based on a year of ethnographic observation of the police as they worked, I examine the relationship between institutional pressures, perceptions of problems and populations, and responses to citizens’ calls for service. I suggest that work in segregated districts produces divergences in the experiences of patrol officers, creating different sets of pressures that align with constructs of the deservingness and empowerment of city residents. Even in the absence of racial intent, structural and institutional dynamics shape police-community relations and reinforce the material and symbolic inequalities that attend to historic patterns of segregation.