A photograph of several police officers in riot gear, including helmets and shields, standing in a line at night. One officer in the center holds a shield with the word "POLICE" on it. The background is dark with some orange light, possibly from a fire or flare.

RACE, PLACE, **AND** SUBURBAN POLICING

Too Close for Comfort

A photograph of three large, two-story suburban houses with white siding and dark roofs, set against a clear blue sky. A red octagonal stop sign is visible on the left side of the frame.

Andrea S. Boyles

*Race, Place, and
Suburban Policing*

TOO CLOSE FOR COMFORT

Andrea S. Boyles



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS

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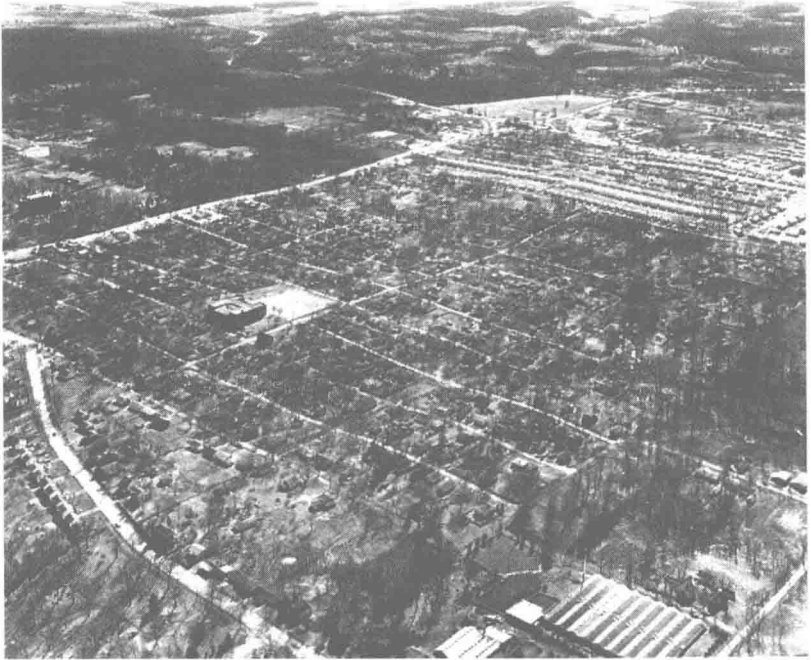


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Race, Place, and Suburban Policing



Aerial view of Meacham Park, 1965. This aerial picture captures Meacham Park in its original size—prior to the 1968 highway construction of Interstate 44 and the 1991 annexation to the City of Kirkwood. Credit goes to the Kirkwood Historical Society, who afforded me unlimited access to donated Meacham Park photos and memorabilia.

And yet her legacy lives . . .

*I dedicate this book to my late mother, Brenda, who embodied
immeasurable resilience through life and death, and to my
children, Prentis, Jr., Anaiah, and Faith, as the next
generation of hope, determination, and accomplishment.*

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FOREWORD

In *Race, Place, and Suburban Policing*, Andrea S. Boyles presents a gripping and at times, alarming depiction of police-community relations in Meacham Park, an African-American enclave of Kirkwood, Missouri. Boyles skillfully demonstrates how both race and community context help shape Meacham Park residents' overall perceptions of and experiences with the police. While an abundant body of research reveals that urban blacks often bear the brunt of unwelcome police contacts (e.g., pedestrian and/or vehicle stops, physically intrusive searches, and arrests), there is considerable debate about the role of place in influencing their disproportionate police encounters. For example, some scholars suggest that race is often confounded with disadvantaged neighborhood context in studies of inner-city African-Americans' negative police interactions, such that attributions of racial bias actually result from officers' preconceived notions of ecologically dangerous and/or suspicious places.

Few studies have been able to disentangle the impact of race from that of disadvantaged community context in explaining dubious police practices, because the urban disadvantage found in African-American neighborhoods is often ecologically unmatched. Simply put, researchers have found it quite difficult to identify inner-city, lower-class white communities for comparison to similar black communities. *Race, Place, and Suburban Policing*, however, enjoys a research design advantage over many prior neighborhood-based, qualitative examinations of police-minority citizen interactions. Specifically, Boyles situates her work in a suburban community context and as a result, the book is uniquely positioned to make several important contributions to the growing body of literature on race, place, and policing.

There are a small number of published monographs and collections investigating African-Americans' experiences with racially biased policing, despite

this issue being an important national and local policy concern. While previous scholarship has advanced our understanding regarding how members of poor minority communities simultaneously experience under- and over-policing, what clearly distinguishes *Race, Place, and Suburban Policing* from its contemporaries is its focus on race and suburban community context. In particular, Boyles' trailblazing research trains the spotlight on the suburbs, drawing attention to an important, novel, and commonly overlooked research setting. Her project parallels the migration patterns of many African-Americans, who, like their counterparts from other racial groups, have long considered the suburbs a refuge from harsh, urban living conditions (e.g., physical decay, social disorder). Boyles offers a compelling set of study findings, challenging the conventional wisdom that suburbia insulates blacks from potential harms once faced in the inner city, including heavy-handed and unwarranted policing tactics.

Race, Place, and Suburban Policing is especially timely given the recent and well-publicized civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri—a nearby St. Louis County suburb. Frustrated community residents and civil rights leaders held several days of protests after an unarmed black male teenager was shot to death by a white Ferguson police officer. The subsequent global media coverage chronicled recurrent clashes between police officers clad in militarized tactical gear and impassioned demonstrators, casting light on long-standing tensions between black Ferguson residents and the police. Boyles' research precedes the Ferguson incident and emphasizes the importance of examining how disadvantaged blacks residing beyond the city limits make sense of their personal and vicarious adverse police experiences.

Boyles spent approximately two years conducting painstaking fieldwork, adeptly using qualitative research methods to systematically compile and later analyze a wealth of incredibly rich data. Her investigation yielded detailed renderings of Meacham Park residents' lived experiences. Furthermore, Boyles interviewed thirty adult respondents at length, and so she was able to identify a number of salient themes. For example, she reveals that study participants were steadfast in their belief that following annexation (and its injurious by-products), Meacham Park had been besieged by police. In fact, many of Boyles' respondents recounted being harassed and mistreated by Kirkwood officers.

The book's subtitle, *Too Close for Comfort*, apparently emerges from important conceptual and theoretical frameworks (i.e., race-and-place effect, group and racial threat perspectives). Throughout the monograph, Boyles

gradually and cleverly brings the title's relevance into sharper focus. For instance, she asserts that "blacks have historically been situated, segregated, and policed in places based on proximity to whites." Accordingly, Meacham Park residents attributed their chances of being arrested to arbitrary police decision making, undeniably influenced by race and/or community context rather than by legitimate legal factors. Finally, Boyles' respondents expressed grave concerns about the long-term life consequences resulting from what they considered highly unethical police actions.

Boyles succeeds in presenting a sobering account of how both race and disadvantaged community context shape suburban blacks' general assessments of police. Thus, she grants readers keen insights into the social world of individuals who are principally studied as offenders but rarely have their own perspectives at the center of social inquiry. For example, Boyles masterfully presents respondents' unsettling descriptions of poor treatment at the hands of police. Some readers of *Race, Place, and Suburban Policing* will undoubtedly reject study participants' disconcerting accounts of police wrongdoing. This is understandable, as most citizens, due to their social status and access to mechanisms for redress, will seldom experience the kinds of police misconduct intensely captured in this book.

Furthermore, the literature aptly demonstrates that citizens sometimes misinterpret officers' behaviors and intentions. What is most relevant for the current study, nonetheless, is precisely *how* Meacham Park residents came to understand their experiences with and perceptions of the police. Given that efforts to improve police legitimacy are often predicated on the input of community members, speaking with those individuals most likely to experience involuntary police contact provides important insights for better understanding their impact. In the end, Boyles offers a holistic examination of how the interactions of race and place helped shape Kirkwood officers' decision making. Boyles also effectively uses the case-study approach to underscore the cumulative impact of negative police experiences. In particular, her careful analysis of circumstances preceding "two nationally profiled" deadly shootings of Kirkwood police officers by Meacham Park residents (i.e., Kevin Johnson and Charles "Cookie" Thornton) helps situate both tragedies within everyday milieus.

Race, Place, and Suburban Policing is written and organized in a way that highlights and takes full advantage of study participants' detailed narratives of their adverse police encounters. Few studies on police-minority interactions have drawn from in-depth interview techniques, which provide unique

opportunities to examine not just the context and circumstances of emotionally charged events, but also their meanings for study participants. The monograph will likely be of particular importance for anyone interested in studying the interactions of race and neighborhood disadvantage. While *Race, Place, and Suburban Policing* has several strengths, there are three main reasons that Boyles should be applauded: (1) for undertaking this arduous and pioneering research, (2) for providing concrete strategies for improving police-community relations, (3) and for her efforts to give historically marginalized people a much-needed voice.

Rod K. Brunson
Rutgers University

PREFACE

Weeks after the shooting death of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown, Jr., by police in Ferguson, Missouri, the events leading up to his death and immediately following remained ambiguous. How did a brief encounter between a young, unarmed black man and the police lend itself to such a brutal killing? Furthermore, how did concerned citizens come to experience militarized policing from countless local and state jurisdictions—where they were tear gassed, shot with rubber bullets, and arrested—in pursuit of answers and perceived justice? I myself was there, in this now internationally recognized St. Louis suburban community, witnessing and documenting much of what transpired in the wake of this incident. Perhaps the answers lie in a range of unexplained black citizen-police incidents; there is an undeniable pattern of dubious encounters and outcomes driving dissention between blacks and law enforcement.

For example, roughly a week prior to the Mike Brown incident, news broke that the untimely death of Eric Garner—a forty-three-year-old black father of six from Long Island, New York—had been ruled a homicide. How could a man lose his life during a police confrontation over his alleged selling of loose cigarettes? More directly, how could he fall prey to an NYPD chokehold at a time when controversial policing policies and practices, ranging from racial profiling to stopping, questioning, and frisking, are at the forefront of national debates? Similarly, who could have imagined that Marlene Pinnock, a black great-grandmother, would receive a barrage of punches from a California Highway Patrolman, straddled atop her in broad daylight, alongside a Los Angeles freeway? Has there not been enough attention called to police improprieties, thereby necessitating video and cell-phone footage of bystanders to serve as wake-up calls? My answer is no; there can never be too

much coverage or attention yielded to a persistently overt continuum of police aggression toward blacks.

Race, place, and policing research can be challenging. We need the police. And policing practices need to be protected and sometimes even covert because full transparency may at times compromise a mission. Still, do private citizens not have the right to critically assess police services and hold them accountable?

Further, how can I as an outsider—a black female academic who has never served a day on the force—shed light on problems within police culture above what its own members are free to do? My position has been to defer to the populations most likely to encounter these problems. Who can better account for policing than the citizens subject to the policing?

For this project, the citizens are those of Meacham Park and the city of Kirkwood, Missouri. Recent policing events within these neighborhoods illuminate often unaccounted-for dimensions of disparity and backlash faced by people of color and perpetuated by the police, and they allow us to closely examine spheres of racial divide in hope of achieving policing that is just. As an embodiment of social progress—teaching and conducting research from what I recognize as privileged space compared to most study participants—I believe that at the core of two adversely adjoined, fractured communities exists very real possibilities for social sensitivity and justice.

Apart from drawing attention to the violence inflicted on Brown, Garner, Pinnock, and others discussed throughout this book, and apart from Meacham Park residents' experiences that this book brings to light, innumerable instances of heated, even deadly exchanges between blacks and law enforcement officers have not been—and will never be—documented. Therefore, I am even more resolved today to further race, place, and policing dialogue than I was five years ago when this project began. My hope through this study has been to advance the human condition and quality of life in all communities and, as a catalyst for social change, to afford uninterrupted space for true social examination and criticism, thus precipitating social improvement.

Andrea S. Boyles
August 30, 2014

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Writing a book must be one of the most intimidating yet rewarding experiences ever. I entered this process excited and extremely humbled, recognizing it as an amazing milestone, and it is in this spirit that I finished it—nervously hopeful, but mostly lowly and grateful. Therefore, it is with immeasurable gratitude that I extend thanks to the following people. It is through their contributions, personal and professional, that I was motivated to write this book, while simultaneously remaining committed to and able to endure life's complexities alongside of it.

For starters, I would like to thank Dana Britton, Spencer Wood, and Robert Schaefer for supporting me. Dana provided me with safe space and mentorship while at Kansas State University, and thus, I learned a lot while there, academically and otherwise. I absorbed a lot from Dana—her instruction and intuitiveness with navigating and climbing the Ivory Tower. More directly, I am appreciative of her support for my project and for helping me think about my data comprehensively and, in its infancy, deliver it intelligibly. Likewise, I am grateful to Spencer for always taking time to recognize and celebrate my endeavors, for always having recognized me as a skilled student, and projecting me to be even more accomplished, as a colleague. And lastly, Robert . . . where should I begin? Thank you for believing in me and mentoring me well beyond the doctoral program. I appreciate your availability, your willingness to offer advice and guidance as I ventured into the world of book publishing. You can never know what your involvement—your excitement about it all—has meant to me. Students can all but hope for high regard and professional validation from former professors. Yours continuously resonated loudly and clearly for me. Thanks, Dr. Schaefer.