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# Recognizing “camera cues”: policing, cellphones and citizen countersurveillance

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## Abstract

Over the past decade, recording technologies have enabled organized activists and ordinary residents to capture and circulate videos of police misconduct. Existing research focuses primarily, however, on organized activists who rely on formal training programs to record police behaviors. If formal programs train organized activists to capture police abuses on camera, how then do ordinary residents determine when they should record police behavior? Drawing on in-depth interviews with Black men who live in a Southside Chicago neighborhood, this study finds that residents’ recurrent interactions with police enable them to interpret officers’ words and actions as symbols of police misconduct, which, in subsequent exchanges, serve as signals to record events with their cellphones – what I term “camera cues.” Camera cues facilitate situated conceptions of legal authority that trigger residents’ distrust of police, reflecting the micro-dynamic connections between individuals’ legal consciousness and legal cynicism. Equipped with cellphones, residents scrutinize officers’ outward displays and police–citizen interactions to challenge police misconduct. While recording police behavior makes it possible at least occasionally to resist the dominance of legal authority, doing so often involves additional risks, including the destruction of their cellphones, verbal and physical threats, and arrests.

**Keywords:** police misconduct; legal cynicism; legal consciousness; resistance; technologies

## Introduction

“I CAN’T BREATHE” and the 2014 cellphone-generated video that exposed the encounter in which police officer Daniel Pantaleo choked Eric Garner to death now stand as a striking reminder of the intrusive nature and interpretative impact that

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policing practices have on ordinary residents. Before Pantaleo targeted Garner for selling individual cigarettes, cities like New York and Chicago legally authorized proactive policing strategies that increased the frequency of encounters between police and residents in areas city officials identify as crime hotspots (Baumgartner et al. 2018; Fagan et al. 2016; Skogan 2023). Disproportionately targeting Black men (Brunson 2007; Duck 2017; Gau and Brunson 2015; Kirk and Papachristos 2011), these intrusive police stops have prompted residents like Ramsey Orta to respond to the pervasive presence of police by using their cellphones to record police behavior. As Orta recalled, his accumulated knowledge of police behaviors informed his decision to record Garner's final moments: "I always *seen* them cops doing something to somebody else, so I figured I'd just record it" (emphasis added; Sanburn, 2015: 2). Like the residents who participated in this study, Orta exemplifies how ordinary residents develop aspects of their legal consciousness, commonsense understandings of the law and legal actors (Nielsen 2000; Sibley 2005), from past police contacts that influence their future interpretations and situated distrust of legal actors.

Amid the looming threat of police misconduct, research documents how organized activists attend formal training programs to learn how to use video equipment to record police behaviors (Bock 2016; Bradshaw 2013; Huey et al. 2006; Wilson and Serisier 2010). The findings suggest that formal training programs serve as a site where organized activists can revise and refine their legal consciousness to interpret and anticipate police misconduct. For example, Stuart (2016b) observes that Black male residents-turned-activists undergo intensive legal training to learn how to anticipate police behaviors and capture misconduct on camera. Yet, ordinary residents have generated some of the most notable videos of police misconduct, capturing the final fatal moments of Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Philando Castile in Falcon Heights, Minnesota, and George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Cellphone-generated videos gathered by ordinary residents have also ignited the Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstrations for racial justice that amplified during 2020, even in the face of the threat posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given recent research and social events, an important question remains: If formal programs train organized activists to capture police abuses on camera, how then do ordinary residents determine when they should record police behavior?

This article examines Black residents' everyday exchanges with formal legal actors, in this case, police officers, as interactions that refine their "complex repertoire of meanings" (Merry 1990: 5) about the law, specifically police misconduct and the racially discriminatory operations of law enforcement. Drawing on in-depth interviews with Black men living in a heavily policed neighborhood on the Southside of Chicago, this article demonstrates that their legal consciousness includes socially located ways of seeing and hearing formal legal actors and residents that facilitate situated assessments of the legitimacy of legal authority. Through frequent police encounters, residents learn to distill aspects of officers' outward displays as visually and sonically significant symbols of police misconduct (see Obasogie 2010; Schwarz 2015; Zerubavel 1999; and Mead and Schubert 1934 on significant symbols). In subsequent exchanges, symbols serve as signals, or "camera cues," that enable targeted victims and bystanders to capture cellphone recordings of police misconduct. However, residents must often recognize and respond to camera cues while under legally authorized surveillance and in confrontations with police officers, at times experiencing

verbal and physical assaults and destruction of their property. The following analysis extends sociolegal research by bridging scholarship on legal cynicism and legal consciousness to show how ordinary residents rely on situated interpretations when deciding to distrust the police and document officers' behaviors.

### Police misconduct, Black men and legal cynicism

American history and contemporary events provide ample evidence of the abusive practices that police officers have employed against Black men (Hinton 2021; Muhammad 2010). At the turn of the twentieth century, the Chicago Police Department relied on aggressive local law enforcement operations that disproportionately targeted Black residents, which ignited local and national movements against police misconduct (Balto 2019; Hinton 2021). Racial inequalities in police misconduct have continued. In the late twentieth century, from 1972 through 1991, Chicago Commander Jon Burge and several officers, widely known as the "Midnight Crew," used suffocation, shock and sexual abuse to extract confessions from over 100 Black men (Baer 2020; Hagan et al. 2022; Ralph 2020). In 2015, the People's Law Office filed a Reparations Ordinance on behalf of 57 survivors of police torture. As a result, the Chicago City Council agreed to a \$5.5 million-dollar reparation settlement and a monument to honor police torture survivors (Ralph 2020; Taylor 2019). Despite a recent public reckoning, the Department of Justice 2016 Patterns and Practices Report concluded that Chicago police officers continue to use excessive force with lethal outcomes that violate individuals' Fourth Amendment rights (Black 2017). The past and present events involving intensified policing, torture tactics and police-involved shootings exemplify the immensely fractured relationships between police officers and Black men.

Correspondingly, longstanding research consistently shows that legal cynicism, the distrust of the law and formal legal actors, is a prevalent cultural orientation among Black Americans (Hagan and Albonetti 1982; Muller and Schrage 2014). Although the sources of legal cynicism are varied, they include "police violence, nonchalance, unresponsiveness, racial bias, ineffectiveness at fighting crime, and failure to arrest those who have committed crimes" (Bell 2016: 319; see also Desmond et al. 2016; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; and Sampson 2012). Extending these insights, Bell (2017) reorients the theory of legal cynicism with "legal estrangement," which interrogates the collective and contextual conditions that influence distrust. According to Bell (2017: 2054), legal estrangement is defined as "the intuition among many people in poor communities of color that the law operates to exclude them from society." Importantly, legal estrangement theory describes how Black residents express a conflicted desire for police protection and suggests that distrust of legal actors is generalized and situated.

Amid legal cynicism and estrangement, existing studies categorize a range of citizen responses to interactions with legal actors. For example, Bell (2016) demonstrates the situational conditions under which low-income Black mothers trust the police, indicating how residents develop localized perceptions of legal actors. While some residents strategically trust the police, Werth (2012) finds that returning residents selectively engage with parole officers while negotiating reentry. Similarly, Clair (2021) also shows

that poor residents withdraw from legal officials and actively cultivate lay legal knowledge to resist the authority of their lawyers. Research can benefit from analyzing how residents negotiate their distrust of the broader legal system situationally to recognize which police officers are committed to misconduct rather than safety.

Microlevel accounts of interactions with police can also uncover more about the situational dynamism of residents' legal cynicism. Research shows that residents establish trust in police based on "cues that communicate information about the intentions and character" of police officers (Jackson et al. 2012: 4). Thus, this study conceptualizes camera cues as indicators that convey information that residents use to judge whether they should distrust police and deploy their cellphones to document misconduct. By examining residents' interactions with police as a process wherein residents learn to distill police behaviors into recognizable symbols associated with police misconduct, this study extends this research by demonstrating how some outward police displays trigger distrust among Black men. In these situations, distrust operates as a cultural orientation to law enforcement that residents invoke based on their pertinent knowledge of police behavior, allowing residents to detect officers' intentions based on their outward displays and perceivable actions (see Barbalet 2009; Chan and Yao 2018; and Tyler and Huo 2002).

Proactive policing policies have also created recurring legal contacts where residents learn about the situational conditions under which they should distrust legal actors. Proactive policing comprises "all policing strategies that have as one of their goals the prevention or reduction of crime and disorder and that are not reactive in terms of focusing primarily on uncovering ongoing crime or on investigating or responding to crimes once they have occurred" (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018: 1). Police departments use "stop-and-frisk" techniques as a proactive and person-focused crime-reduction strategy to detain, interrogate and search citizens to detect and disrupt criminal activities and behaviors (Baumgartner et al. 2018; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). Although the Fourth Amendment prohibits unreasonable searches, the landmark *Terry v. Ohio* 1968 case established the "reasonable suspicion" standard for police stops. Police disproportionately enact stop-and-frisk in low-income Black communities – even after controlling for crime and other factors (Fagan et al. 2016). In a recent Chicago survey, 40 percent of older Black men and 70 percent of younger Black men reported being searched, threatened, handcuffed or injured by police (Skogan 2017; 2023). Thus, for many Black men living in low-income urban neighborhoods, a less restrictive legal threshold for police stops has created a constant threat of police stopping and searching them. One prevalent consequence of police contact is "system avoidance" or the tendency of individuals to avoid vital social institutions (Brayne 2014; Goffman 2009). As a result, residents' perceptions of current or future police contact can influence residents' responses to subsequent legal interventions.

Scholarship on procedural justice also demonstrates that fairness in police encounters informs individuals' perceptions of the legitimacy of the law. Procedural justice refers to the process-based standards by which individuals evaluate whether police officers treat them with dignity and respect and perform without bias (Mazerolle et al. 2013; Tyler 2004). Findings show that Black residents disproportionately report negative personal and vicarious interactions with police that undermine their beliefs in the legitimacy of the law and legal actors (Brunson 2007; Duck 2017; Fagan and Davies 2000;

Gau and Brunson 2015; 2010; Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Meares et al. 2015; Tyler et al. 2014). While vicarious exposure is often minimized, vicarious experiences with police can cause individuals to recognize themselves as defined by the social groups with which they identify and enhance their perceptions of police officers' capacity for misconduct (Bell 2017; Brunson 2007; Clay-Warner 2001; Jones-Brown 2000; Weitzer and Tuch 2004). For example, highly publicized videos of police misconduct often align with Black residents' cumulative procedural injustices (Kwak et al. 2019). Merging legal cynicism and procedural justice theories to foster deeper inquiries into residents' perceptions of police can reveal how residents develop situated cynical conceptions of police and the *illegitimacy* of the law.

As researchers continue to examine Black residents' relationships with legal actors, it is important to understand how residents determine when to distrust them and take resistant actions. Indeed, research has not focused on the discrete bits of symbolic information that lead residents frequently exposed to police officers to invoke legal cynicism. While legal cynicism theory is rooted in racial and cultural context, scholars have only provided nascent insights about the relationships between legal consciousness and legal cynicism (see Young and Billings 2020). More empirical evidence and analytical work are necessary to connect legal cynicism and legal consciousness. The present study emphasizes how Black male residents become acculturated to identifying when a legal intervention is significant because misconduct is imminent. As building blocks of social life, the senses enable perception and require cultural tools to attribute meaning to sights and sounds (Bourdieu 1977; Simmel 1997). Thus, this study uses a micro-sociological approach to examine how Black men's encounters with legal actors generate sensibilities, patterns of meanings and anticipations and strategies of action (see Fine and Fields 2008 and Merry 1990).

### The sociolegal context of recording police misconduct

Recent sociolegal scholarship indicates that cultural sociology can provide additional insights into police-citizen interactions by examining how individuals develop systems of meanings about legal actors (Bell 2016; Clair 2021; Stuart 2016a). Contemporary cultural research employs a "cognitive view" (DiMaggio 1997) that conceptualizes culture as an interactional product of information, schemas, the symbolic universe and social interactions (Cerulo et al. 2021). This study focuses on how routine contacts enable residents to acquire pertinent information about police officers, which influences their subsequent sensory perceptions of police behaviors (see Lembo 2020 and Schwarz 2015). As Zerubavel (1999) establishes, interpretative frameworks filter information obtained through the senses, and individuals learn to see the world with an "optical style" informed by their social statuses and experiences (see Du Bois ([1903] 1990 on second sight and Young 2011). The senses help individuals identify symbols (see Mead and Schubert 1934 and Simmel 1997). Symbols assist individuals in interpreting their experiences by organizing relevant information (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003 and Swidler 1986). Thus, symbols are bound to past experiences and facilitate future outcomes. Given that the subjective interpretation of human experience is critical for understanding human action (Berger and Luckmann 1966; Blumer 1969; Mead and Schubert 1934), this study incorporates cultural sociology with legal

consciousness research to understand how police contact influences how Black male residents tie situated sensory perceptions to officers' capacity for misconduct.

Legal consciousness scholarship decenters the formal law to examine how the law invokes commonsense understandings of the law and legal actors that ordinary residents can use to engage, avoid and resist the law (Chua and Engel 2019; Ewick and Silbey 1998; 2003; Nielsen 2000; Silbey 2005). One of the central messages of legal consciousness literature is that ordinary residents' resistance to the law requires a consciousness of how legality establishes unjust distributions of power (Ewick and Silbey 1998; 2003). Through this lens, police officers operate as legal superordinates, while ordinary residents serve as legal subordinates who can craft openings to resist legal hegemony (Ewick and Silbey 1998; 2003). In Ewick and Silbey's (1998) *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life*, they reveal that some people view themselves "against the law" and engage in resistant acts "using what the situation ... makes available—materially and discursively—to fashion solutions" (49). For example, Young (2014) finds that some people use other people's observations or "second-order legal consciousness" to cultivate legal knowledge about police practices. As police mete out treatment based on racial and gendered status (Remster et al. 2022), they significantly increase Black men's opportunities to build a commonsense understanding of legal actors. This study extends legal consciousness scholarship by emphasizing personal and vicarious experiences and racialized enforcement of the law as integral factors in how Black male residents build commonplace understandings of legal actors that "become[s] synthesized into a set of circulating, often taken-for-granted understandings, and habits" (Silbey 2005: 324).

Police officers hold the power to impose race, as a set of cultural meanings and experiences, onto Black residents through social interactions (see Browne 2015 on racializing surveillance). In turn, police reinforce racializing experiences, such as Black men's heightened risk of involuntary police contact and police violence (Rojek et al. 2012; Voigt et al. 2017). Police violence, like domestic violence, is an institutionalized tactic that attacks the weak through repetitive patterns in which antagonists, targeted victims and bystanders become accustomed to acting out their roles and using resources for self-preservation (Campbell et al. 1998; Collins 2009). In this way, police officers are an instrument in the (re)production of racialized social control as they dictate who lives and dies (Mbembe 2019). As Mills (2014) notes, "The coercive arms of the state ... the police ... need to be seen as ... working both to keep the peace and prevent crime among the white citizens, and to maintain the racial order and detect and destroy challenges to it. ..." (84). Thus, the racialized operation of law enforcement can promote distrust among Black residents who often doubt that police officers' behaviors are efforts to meet communities' safety needs (Brunson 2007).

Within the racialized operation of law enforcement, police contact is an interactional site where Black residents can mutually construct legal and racial consciousness (see Webb 2017). Police contact, experienced personally and vicariously, is a social process through which Black residents develop ideas about their racial positioning in the legal system. The Theory of Double Consciousness provides a theoretical grounding to understand how police officers influence Black residents' modes of sensory perception (Du Bois [1903] 1990). Du Bois ([1903] 1990) argues that Black people develop consciousness from racialized personal and vicarious experiences, some of which include recognizing how the American criminal legal system functions as a racialized system of

social control or a “double system of justice.” As observed in the present study, the frequency of legal contact provides Black men with insights into how racial status informs access to justice and forces them to acknowledge themselves and others as defined by the racial groups they inhabit (see Hegtvedt 2005). Accordingly, residents mutually construct their racial and legal consciousness through racialized personal and vicarious experiences. Racial status represents a distinctive set of relationships within the legal system that influences forms of legal consciousness that are simultaneously gendered, classed and inflected by other statuses.

In communities with inadequate police protection, residents develop a legal consciousness oriented toward “self-help” actions that require the identification of symbols to anticipate threatening situations and avoid victimization (Anderson 1990; Stuart 2016b; see Black 1983). Specifically, Anderson (1990) observes that urban residents cultivate an indigenous interpretative framework of “street wisdom” that “allows one to ‘see-through’ public situations, to anticipate what is about to happen based on cues and signals ....” (5). Crucially, Anderson (1990) identifies how street-wise residents become accustomed to the elements of their neighborhood, including police officers and their residents. Similarly, Stuart (2016a; 2016b) develops “cop wisdom” to describe how residents process information and recognize available options to predict police activities to evade police contact. This study extends these inquiries by examining how residents conduct situated interpretations of police–citizen interactions based on discrete bits of symbolic information residents gain from exposure to police officers.

Despite the social prevalence of ordinary residents’ cellphone recording of police behaviors, ordinary residents are noticeably absent from the empirical research on citizens’ use of cellphones and other recording technologies (Søgaard et al. 2023). Research documents how organized activists use recording technologies to expose police misconduct, support fair investigations and protect their and others’ lives from injury and death (Richardson 2020; Sandhu 2016; Sandhu and Haggerty 2017; Stuart 2016b). Formal training programs help organized activists learn how to engage in “countersurveillance,” the deliberate and strategic uses of technologies to challenge institutionalized watchers and power asymmetries (Huey et al. 2006; Marx 2003; Monahan 2006). Yet, some scholars suggest that citizens recording of police conduct operates as a form of “sousveillance” – the recording by an individual without institutional power of an event in which they are a participant to document the behavior of entities with institutional authority (Mann and Ferenbok 2013). The ordinary residents in this study, however, demonstrate how their exposure to police conduct becomes a process that informs them of police officers’ behavioral tendencies and allows them to deploy their cellphones in response to officers’ conduct. This study intervenes in debates over the relationship between countersurveillance and sousveillance to show how ordinary residents use cellphones as a counterresponse to police that they enact under the gaze of legally authorized police surveillance.

Several technological innovations, social organizations and sociolegal changes have also created a political and cultural context that enables and constrains American citizens’ perceptions and use of cellphones as a resource to contest legal authority and resolve legal conflicts (Richardson 2020; Stuart 2016b). Recent advancements in cellphone technology have transformed the gathering and sharing of visual data and information with varying reception by formal legal institutions and actors

(Brayne et al. 2018; Goldsmith 2010; Stuart 2016b). According to a 2021 report by the Pew Research Center, 83 percent of African Americans own smartphones. Another survey study finds that 67 percent of Americans who own smartphones use them to “share photos, videos, or commentary about events happening in their community” (Smith 2015). At the same time, social organizations are increasingly influencing a renewed legal landscape to protect citizens during interactions with police officers. BLM organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) encourage citizens to use cellphones to broadcast their interactions with police officers.

The law on the books in the United States and Illinois has also influenced how citizens perceive and deploy cellphones when interacting with legal actors. Adhering to the Fourth Amendment, most United States jurisdictions safeguard individual privacy through laws that prohibit eavesdropping (Gibson 2015). Illinois’s eavesdropping law, one of the nation’s strictest, previously stipulated that an individual who obtains “all-party consent” can legally record events (Freivogel 2011; Whitson 2014). For example, Illinois residents once faced 15 years of imprisonment if a recorded party was an on-duty police officer. In *ACLU of Illinois v. Alvarez*, a case that emerged from the ACLU’s police accountability program, the Seventh Circuit court’s decision restricted the scope of Illinois’s eavesdropping law: the “eavesdropping statute does in fact ‘restrict a medium of expression’—the use of a common instrument of communication—and thus an integral step in the speech process” (Whitson 2014: 206). In 2014, the Illinois Supreme Court held that the eavesdropping law was unconstitutional because it “burden[ed] substantially more speech than is necessary to serve a legitimate state interest in protecting conversational privacy” (Gibson 2015: 23). At the end of 2014, then-Governor Pat Quinn signed into law Senate Bill 1342, which amended and reinstated a criminal eavesdropping law in Illinois, but it forbade only the recording of private conversations. Since then, Illinois’s legal decisions have established an institutional foundation for allowing citizens to legally capture audiovisual recordings of police in public settings where they do not maintain a reasonable expectation of privacy.

With all of these insights, this article asks: If formal programs train organized activists to capture police abuses on camera, how then do ordinary residents determine when they should record police behavior? Black men living in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago provide ideal case studies to examine how police contact influences how ordinary residents determine to record police encounters with their cellphones. Following a description of the setting and methodological approach, the findings analyze police contact as a social process through which residents develop patterns of perception of officers’ capacity for police misconduct. The analysis emphasizes the similarities and distinctions between personal and vicarious police exposure and the legal knowledge these experiences generate. By examining the experiences of targeted victims and bystanders, the following pages indicate how recurrent police interactions enable citizens to generate memory-maintained expectations that past patterns will repeat in subsequent interactions. The conclusion discusses the implications of resident recordings of police, offers theoretical interventions for legal cynicism and legal consciousness scholarship and presents evidence regarding camera cues in other communities beyond the study setting.



## Setting and methods

The following analysis focuses on moments when Black men deploy their cellphones when interacting with police. Respondents were drawn from the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago to understand how frequent police contact impacts low-income Black men. Englewood occupies a three-square-mile area on the Southside of Chicago and is home to approximately 24,369 residents. The 2021 Community Data Snapshot reports that Englewood's population is 95 percent Black, 55 percent earn less than \$25,000 annually and 25 percent are unemployed. Although Englewood residents live through digital disadvantages, 74 percent maintain access to one or more computing devices, and 18 percent own or have access to smartphones only (Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning 2021). Media outlets also regard Englewood as one of Chicago's neighborhoods with a high incidence of crime (Pollard 2015). For example, during the first year of data collection, 2017, there were 48 criminal homicides, 601 robberies and 1,169 aggravated assault-and-battery incidents. The Englewood neighborhood of Chicago also remains a consistent site for police misconduct and unwarranted criminalization. In 1994, police tortured four Black male teenagers, now known as the "Englewood Four," into falsely confessing to a rape and murder of a woman. In 2017, DNA evidence and supporting testimony from a former prosecutor on the case exonerated these (now adult) men, and they later received a \$31 million settlement for wrongful imprisonment (Browne 2019).

Englewood was also previously home to the proactive policing policy "Operation Impact," which concentrated officers in Chicago neighborhoods that city officials identified as high crime. Following the suspension of Operation Impact, the Chicago Police Department renewed its public commitment to community policing. However, the Chicago Police Department faced widespread criticism when police dash camera footage showed Officer Jason Van Dyke shooting Laquan McDonald, a 17-year-old young Black man, sixteen times. The footage previously concealed by then-superintendent Garry McCarthy prompted the Department of Justice to conduct a civil rights investigation, which concluded that the CPD had engaged in a "pattern of civil rights violations" (The United States Justice Department, 2017). In 2016, then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel and newly appointed Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson hired additional police officers and increased the CPD's budget to \$4 billion over 3 years (Vargas et al. 2020). Emanuel later agreed to a consent decree on behalf of the City of Chicago and revised the police department's use-of-force policy. Similar conditions have continued under the administration of Police Superintendent David Brown and Mayor Lori Lightfoot. Despite policy revisions and police reforms, police contact remains a common experience among Black residents who live on Chicago's South and West sides (Skogan 2023; Vargas et al. 2020).

This study draws from a sample of 27 in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 23 low-income Black men who resided and received services in Englewood and had recorded police behavior.<sup>1</sup> Data collection took place in 2017, 2018 and 2021. The data-collection period included several critical moments, particularly before and after the day in Minneapolis when Darnella Frazier captured then-Officer Derek Chauvin on her cellphone, suffocating George Floyd to death. Throughout data collection, I relied on purposive sampling, where I recruited Black men who had interacted with police and focused on a subset of participants who had recorded police behaviors.

To assess their socioeconomic status, respondents self-identified as “low-income” during the interview and offered income estimates through a demographic questionnaire.

The sample focuses on low-income Black men to examine the racial, gendered and classed group whose members are disproportionately likely to be arrested, incarcerated and suffer from police violence (Kramer and Remster 2018; Rojek et al. 2012; Voigt et al. 2017). This sample includes five men who received services in Englewood and recorded police behavior, providing some evidence that the patterns identified in this study exist for ordinary residents who live in other Chicago neighborhoods. Respondents’ ages in this sample ranged from 18 to 56 years. The age gradation coincides with those in existing survey reports, indicating that older Black men continue to disproportionately experience investigative police searches (Skogan 2017; 2023). I refer to the Black men in this study primarily as “ordinary residents” to underscore that their neighborhood is a principal location of the surveillance they experience. I also use “ordinary” to emphasize that these men are not organized activists or legal professionals but residents who experienced and witnessed police contact while navigating their city and neighborhood.

To be included in each phase of the study, individuals had to live or receive services in Englewood, identify as Black men and hold American citizenship. During the first phase, I interviewed men about their perceptions of police and police technologies, strategies for navigating police surveillance and decisions to record police interventions. I recruited respondents in public spaces by asking prospective participants: “Would you like to participate in a study about your experiences with police in Englewood?” These interviews took place in private meeting rooms in a coffee shop and a local grocery store. In the second and third data-collection phases, participants qualified for this study based on previous requirements, living and receiving services in Englewood and prior incarceration in jails or prisons. In the second phase, I used a private office and a coffee shop to conduct two follow-up interviews with two residents from phase one who had recorded police behavior and interviewed additional participants who participated in a local community organization. During the third phase, I recruited residents by distributing flyers at local shops and community organizations. I conducted interviews via a password-protected Zoom room and others in a private room at a local church. I also conducted two follow-up interviews with one participant who recorded police behavior.

The interviews were digitally recorded and ranged from 60 to 180 minutes. I generated field notes about each respondent after each interview, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim. My racial and gendered statuses as a Black man enhanced my rapport with participants throughout the data-collection process. In particular, several participants explained that our shared statuses encouraged them to participate in the study. I assigned each participant a pseudonym and omitted the names of street locations to protect their privacy. However, I use the neighborhood’s actual name for fact-checking and replication purposes. The quotations are verbatim constructions of participants’ expressions, while I use italics and capitalization to draw attention to vital portions of residents’ descriptions.

The semi-structured interview guide enabled me to probe the topic of cell-phone recording and adapt to each resident’s specific experiences. During interviews, residents answered questions about their direct interactions with police, vicarious interactions with police, the factors they considered when interacting with police,

experiences associated with recording police conduct, officers' reactions to being recorded and awareness of the legality of recording police behavior. Residents reported dozens of police encounters and instances of vicarious exposure to high-profile videos of police violence, specifically those involving Laquan McDonald and Eric Garner, and local videos they accessed through *YouTube* and *Facebook*. After listening to audio recordings and reading transcripts, I engaged in descriptive coding to categorize situations where residents used their cellphones. I examined each case of cellphone recording, coded for situational dynamics and consulted relevant literature, repeating this process while relying on inductive and abductive reasoning (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Timmermans and Tavory 2012). I returned to transcripts to juxtapose situations where residents recorded police conduct with their past experiences with police. This analytical approach offered the distinct advantage of allowing me to trace situational similarities and differences to examine how residents determine when to deploy their cellphones.

### Learning to interpret and anticipate police behaviors

For many Black men living in low-income urban neighborhoods, the prevalence of police contact has made police searches operate as a set of patterned interactions they understand and are accustomed to repeating ( Jones 2018). For example, one of the residents with whom I became acquainted, Greg, a 36-year-old resident, described police contact as routine and racialized: "I have many encounters with them [the police], that happen all the time in Englewood. You get frisked just because you look Black." Regular exposure to the police has enabled residents like Greg to develop socially located ways of sensing and interpreting police-citizen interactions, thereby facilitating their anticipation of police misconduct during future encounters (see Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Residents learned which officers' words and actions preceded and accompanied police misconduct through personal experiences with police misconduct and vicarious experiences with police mistreatment of others. With each personal and vicarious police exposure point, residents acquire pertinent legal knowledge about the situational dynamics of police misconduct, allowing them to determine when to distrust police and consider officers illegitimate (see Gau 2011). As a result, residents built a legal consciousness reflective of the racialized operation of law enforcement. As such, residents learned to interpret and anticipate police officers' behaviors as symbols that represented what police officers were likely to do next and later served as signals for recording police behavior.

Among the symbolic information residents acquired from police encounters, some residents learned to interpret officers' words and verbal expressions as indicators of their capacity for misconduct. Craig, a 29-year-old resident, endured routine interactions with police throughout his adolescence that persisted once he departed a juvenile facility with a criminal record. As a result, Craig insisted: "I see [the] police every day since I been growin' up." With each successive police interaction, Craig has attuned his legal consciousness and developed a socially located way of identifying unjust police officers' behaviors. On one occasion, while walking home from work, Craig recalled running into police: "I ... see police [and hear them say] 'bring your little dumb ass here' ... and now I know you, one of them petty officers." While police

subjected Craig to intense scrutiny while he engaged in an innocuous behavior, this encounter helped Craig learn how to interpret officers' verbal expressions to determine the type of police officer before him. According to Craig, these types of police interactions helped him become more aware of how police officers and community members operate as sources of surveillance:

It just made me wiser. It made me think no matter what you [are] doing, somebody [is] watching you. You ain't just being watched by stickups, robbers, or killers, [and] you being watched by the police. It made me alert like a motherfucker.

In Craig's words, the threat of police misconduct made his situated inspection of police behaviors necessary: "Cause like they don't do they job. Most of 'em don't care. Why [do] you think police out here killing innocent people?" Past experiences with police showed Craig the utility of interpreting police officers' verbal expressions as evidence of their likelihood to treat harmless behaviors as harmful.

Through frequent contact with police, residents accessed legal knowledge about when officers will act unfairly and are likely to become violent. Ace, a 26-year-old resident, firmly believed that police officers scrutinized him because of his dreadlocked hair and clothing centering his Black identity. In Ace's words, he observed police consistently "picking on people for no reason" and witnessed how police specifically mistreated Black people. In light of these experiences, Ace learned to direct his attention toward how police approach him to determine whether they will become violent:

First impressions are a lasting impression. First impressions got a lot to do with it. So, it all just depends on the officer and how he come[s] at me. And really, I got a good sense of energy, so I pay attention to his energy, his body language like if he [is] gonna be aggressive or anything. I'ma know because I'ma see it.

Significantly, Ace described how he focuses on how officers treat him and "sensing" their energy through their outward displays, an interpretative ability he cultivated through his interactions with the police. For example, during a recent traffic stop, Ace initially perceived the officer as approaching his vehicle in a hostile manner: "The police pulled me over and came up aggressively to the van and was like: 'hand me your license and registration and roll down those windows, you got all those people in the car ... ROLL DOWN THE WINDOW.'" After an emotionally charged exchange, Ace received a warning from the officer. From this experience and others, Ace has generated vital legal knowledge that refined his legal consciousness and enabled him to interpret police officers' behavioral tendencies as symbols that forecast officers' propensity for enacting unwarranted violence.

Routine police contact has been central in shaping how longstanding residents acquired legal knowledge about police officers across multiple junctures and contextual conditions. Silas, a 56-year-old resident, experienced his first police stop at 8 years of age and has interacted frequently with police ever since. When Silas matured, he faced several personal hardships that led to substance abuse and retail theft to support his habit. During this time, he often confronted police who denigrated him

through racially marked verbal abuses. These accumulated interactions with police influenced Silas's interpretation of officers' racial backgrounds, words and subtle actions as multilayered symbols of police misconduct. Indicating how these symbols of police behavior become an embodied feeling that represents how police will behave in future interactions, Silas remarked:

Well, if I see a Black cop and he's with another Black cop as his partner, I feel kinda cool about it. Because he don't have no intention on hurting his brother, that's not the thought in they head. But you can look at some white cops as they drive past you and look at you and probably turn and say something to his buddy. They use the n-word to address what they see within you. 'Look at this nigger,' you can just feel it. 'What do you think this nigger got on him? I betcha he got something illegal on him.'

As Silas distinguished between white and Black cops, he invoked racialized group standards to understand differential patterns of law enforcement. Although research casts some doubt on the idea that Black officers perform police work more effectively for Black residents (Brunson and Gau 2015), he believed that white officers are more likely to harm Black people. Silas used past police contacts as legal knowledge to interpret officers' racial backgrounds and identify officers likely to engage in misconduct, thereby situationally distrusting officers' based on their perceivable actions.

In the rapidly expanding digital archive of videos depicting police-citizen interactions, residents often encountered other people's experiences with the police. Vicarious police contact also contributed to how residents learn to sense and discern when an officer's actions will likely precede police misconduct. Online videos exposed residents to other people's experiences with and perceptions of police officers and enabled residents to associate meanings with outcomes of police misconduct, thereby building their second-order legal consciousness (see Young 2014). Juan, a 26-year-old resident, watched a video on Facebook showing police harassing members affiliated with New Era Chicago, a local community organization. According to Juan, this video revealed to him how police unfairly target New Era Chicago members:

Last year, in April, they had a video, and they had just got done picking up trash in the neighborhood. So, they were ending the day doing chants. Of course, the police showed up and started fucking with 'em. You see them throwing down 15-year-old boys, pushing women and old men in the group. *And I was like, every time they out here, the cops want to fuck with them* (emphasis added).

By viewing this local video about police, Juan acquired legal knowledge of relationships between members affiliated with a local community group and law enforcement. The video provided Juan with visual access to police-citizen interactions, allowing him to replay these exchanges to learn to recognize repetitive patterns of police misconduct and violence (see Collins 2009). However, as Juan watched this video, he experienced a marginalizing effect of policing based on his racial and residential connections to the targeted victims in the video. While this video and corresponding comments served as a digital source of trauma, it also contained and conveyed symbolic messages that

primed Juan to distrust police officers when they interacted with this local community group subsequently.

In the context of frequent police exposure and the threat of police misconduct, residents used personal and vicarious experiences to decipher police interactions into recognizable symbols. During each police interaction, residents learned and stored legal knowledge that expanded their cultural orientations to the law by associating specific verbal and nonverbal communications with police misconduct. As a result, residents constructed a legal consciousness, deeply inflected by the racialized operation of law enforcement, encompassing a socially located way to interpret whether legal actors are helpful or harmful. Like residents in other communities who cultivated localized interpretations of police and citizens (Anderson 1990; Bell 2016; Stuart 2016a), Englewood residents acquired symbolic information about police officers that influenced how they determined to distrust police and use cellphones to record police behavior in subsequent interactions.

### Recognizing camera cues

Drawing on legal knowledge learned from their experiences with police, residents identified symbols of police misconduct in tandem with cellphones that subsequently served as signals, or what I term “camera cues,” that they should record specific encounters with police. During routine interactions with police, residents acquired, stored and later retrieved pertinent legal knowledge about officers’ behaviors that enabled the residents to adjust their subsequent responses. Past experiences served as examples of future outcomes, which allowed residents to tie somatic sensations to police misconduct. While interacting with police, some residents overheard officers’ words and tone of voice, some observed officers’ actions and gestures and others observed and overheard police. Although residents’ interpretative approaches differed regarding the senses employed and the signals perceived, the corresponding impressions guided similar patterns of action with cellphones.

Camera cues operated as stores of localized knowledge of preceding events involving police misconduct, wherein residents are targeted victims and bystanders (see Collins 2009). While these roles entailed distinct standpoints in these social interactions, bystanders who recorded police were often targeted by police, becoming victims who experienced coercion, verbal threats, destruction of property and physical assaults. During personal interactions, targeted victims employed interpretations of police conduct to assess whether recording the police was necessary for self-help and self-protection (see Black 1983 and Gau and Brunson 2015). For a bystander, a symbol became a signal for action based on their situated assessment of other citizens and police officers, communicating how bystanders understand that racialized group standards are involved when individuals negotiate access to procedural justice (see Hegtvedt 2005). Bystanders selected police interactions to record, reflecting and reinforcing social ties between bystanders and targeted victims. Across varying standpoints and situations, residents perceived officers’ words and actions as situational factors that revealed the process through which routine police stops escalated to recording-worthy events. Table 1 provides an in-depth layout indicating the contextual conditions under which some of the residents in this study use camera cues and pertinent knowledge alongside the situational outcomes of recording the police.

**Table 1.** Contextual conditions, camera cues, pertinent knowledge and situational outcomes

Contextual conditions	Camera cues	Pertinent knowledge	Situational outcomes
Bystander, Street Stop	Police assert threats to shoot coupled with obscenities.	Craig knew that his neighbor participated in the underground drug economy. From past experiences, Craig learned to treat officers' words as evidence of their intentions.	Craig created a video and saved it on his phone to send to his neighbor.
Bystander, Traffic Stop	Police issue discouraging directives.	From personal and vicarious exposure to police, Mason learned that police in Bloomington engage in a pattern of racialized stops against Black people, particularly in Black neighborhoods.	Mason accepted a thank you from the Black man whom the police stopped and offered to send him the video.
Bystander, Street Raid	Police generate "boom, boom" noises when using hoses filled with mace.	Joel learned to attribute loud sounds to police, informed by his experience with police discharging their weapons during a home raid.	Joel distributed the video via <i>Facebook</i> and sent it to media outlets and Chicago politicians. Joel never learned about any actions taken against the police officers in the video.
Bystander, Street Stop	Police argue with citizens whose relative was murdered.	Owen previously experienced several interactions with police where officers verbally disrespected him and subjected him to invasive public searches.	Owen saved the video on his phone and offered to send it to his neighbors.
Bystander, Traffic Stop	Police stop a Black man because of his tinted windows.	Through frequent police contacts, Jordan learned that officers' body language forecasts whether they are just or unjust.	Police destroyed Jordan's phone. Jordan learned that to record police as a bystander, he must maintain a safe distance to avoid becoming a targeted victim.
Targeted Victim, Street Stop	Police deploy weapons at the onset of a street stop.	Given his background with numerous police raids while growing up in Chicago public housing, Kaleb believed that when officers begin a search with their firearms, violence is imminent.	Police destroyed both of Kaleb's phones, arrested him, charged him, and he spent 5 months in Cook County jail and a month in Statesville prison. As a single father and custodial parent, the police sent his son to the Illinois Department of Child and Family Services.

*(Continued)*

Table 1. (Continued.)

Contextual conditions	Camera cues	Pertinent knowledge	Situational outcomes
Targeted Victim; Traffic Stop	Police invade Ace's personal space and issue directives in an elevated tone of voice.	Past exposure to police through personal and vicarious contacts has taught Ace that officers' words and actions, particularly their initial body language, reflect their likelihood of becoming violent.	Ace survived a threatening police intervention and noticed that the officer's demeanor and behavior shifted when he recorded him.
Bystander, Street Stop	Police accuse a local community group of wielding guns.	Juan recalled watching a video on Facebook where police harassed New Era Chicago, a Black community group focused on advancing safety in Englewood. From this experience, Juan concluded that police unfairly target New Era Chicago.	Juan observed officers call for backup. He also witnessed a lieutenant arrive, who determined the officers had insufficient evidence for an arrest or property seizure.
Bystander, Traffic Stop	Three white officers conduct an invasive search of young Black men in an elevated tone while issuing verbal commands.	Silas learned from past experiences that white officers who shout when issuing directives are likely involved in police misconduct.	Silas heard one officer demand that he stop recording the events as they unfolded. According to Silas, the officers also threatened him with physical violence if he did not stop recording this encounter.

This article demonstrates that one way to assess Black men's relationships with police is by examining the contextual conditions under which they deploy their cellphones to take action against the police. In some situations, officers' outward displays assured residents that police were conducting legally appropriate interventions (Jackson et al. 2012; Tyler and Huo 2002). In situations where officers' outward displays prevented residents' assurance, residents turned to their senses as a source of cultural interpretation, accessed pertinent knowledge and used their cellphones to create an alternative measure of assurance. For example, Josiah, a 20-year-old, emphasized that officers' tonal displays stimulated his awareness of police misconduct: "The tone of voice, if they're rude or not, if they come off arrogant, 'cause most cops that come off arrogant are going to end up being rude again or acting like you're less than them, so I'd always be ready [to record]. Just in case." Thus, Josiah's distrust emerged when he used situated assessments of officers' behaviors as evidence of which police officers were most likely to mistreat him.

Police interventions unfolded quickly, and residents used previous experiences and knowledge to analyze and anticipate officers' verbal and nonverbal behaviors (see Singh 2017 and Tavory and Eliasoph 2013). Kevin, a 42-year-old resident, explained



how his interpretation of police treatment mediated cellphone recording of police behavior: “more and more the police harass[ing] me made being cautious to do so. If he harassing me, I’ll be prepared to record. I feel comfortable recording for *future reference*. It’s just in case they prepare criminal acts against us in the community” (emphasis added). Like Kevin, many residents deployed their cellphones strategically based on situational appraisals that conveyed when visual evidence was needed to document police misconduct. Consequently, residents’ cellphone recording added another layer of scrutiny of police that could constrain officers’ discretionary authority. Yet, some officers confiscated cellphones when they observed residents recording them, in some cases even unlawfully destroying the phones or arresting citizens who recorded their conduct (Wall and Linnemann 2014). Other police officers, however, adjusted their tones, language and actions (Sandhu 2016).

### *Hearing police: words, statements and tones*

Past experiences with police served as templates for future interactions, allowing residents to tie officers’ word choices to impending misconduct. When officers repeatedly threatened physical violence accompanied with obscene language, Craig used officers’ statements as evidence that unnecessary force was imminent and recorded the encounter. In this instance, after the police arrived on the scene, Craig heard officers “makin’ it seem like they was gonna shoot. They were like ‘bring your ass out here before I shoot.’ That’s when I got to recordin’.” While Craig acknowledged that his neighbor sold drugs, he still believed at the time that the threat that officers would injure the neighbor constituted a rationale for deploying his cellphone. This strategic way of hearing police enabled Craig to prepare for a future where officers take violent action against his neighbor: “And I’m like let me record this shit just in case ... this [police officer] do shoot them.” Informed by previous experiences with police who issue verbal threats before they use unnecessary force, Craig deciphered officers’ word choices to indicate their capacity for violence.

The legal knowledge residents accumulated through frequent exposure to police behavior also extended to interactions with police outside the Englewood neighborhood. Mason, a 52-year-old resident, recorded police while visiting his relatives in Bloomington, Illinois. Despite contextual differences, Mason emphasized that Bloomington police operate like Chicago officers: “Police was getting away with a lot of shit down there in Bloomington too. The traffic stops, man, they was locking them up. Bloomington’s just like a little Chicago anyway. And they was only doing that in the Black neighborhoods. They wasn’t stopping the white folks.” With this knowledge in mind, Mason heard police officers issue discouraging directives to prevent him from witnessing their behavior when they stopped another Black man. Rather than remaining passive in the face of what he believed was a blatant law enforcement violation, Mason resisted officers’ directives and recorded the encounter:

The dude [officer] was telling me, keep it moving, you ain’t nothing to do with this, this ain’t none of your business. And was kind of like, in the street, so I got up on the sidewalk. I said it’s not against the law to use my phone for evidence, to make sure this brother ... you all don’t do nothing crazy. And then a lot of people

started joining in too. So they tore his car up, looking for drugs. And they ain't find nothing, so they let him go. But see, just that type of harassment, tearing his shit up. If we had the type of connections and money that white folks have, they wouldn't even do that.

Mason used officers' verbal communications to make deductions that connected the incident with a broader socio-legal context where Black citizens are the recipients of additional legal burdens. Officers' attempts to deter Mason from witnessing the search activated his distrust and led him to anticipate police misconduct and deploy his cellphone to capture an officer physically assaulting a Black man.

Policing has also created unique sounds in urban neighborhoods, including noise from helicopters and firearms that residents became accustomed to experiencing and interpreting (see Goffman 2009). Joel, a 56-year-old resident, witnessed the police raid a home in Englewood. The officers deployed their firearms from the onset of the incident. Joel has learned to associate officers' abusive practices with specific sounds: "The police engaged those people by firing shots at the .... It was an apartment building, and they just started shooting, pow, pow, pow." Subsequently, during a 2020 protest in Englewood, Joel recalled: "I heard these loud booms, 'Boom, boom.'" Joel attributed sonic significance to the "boom, boom, boom." By following these sounds, Joel successfully recorded police using hoses filled with mace to disrupt a peaceful protest against police violence: "And when I got down there, I seen they had these long rods and they was just spraying mace on anybody. Yes, I recorded that." Police officers' use of mace-filled hoses is consistent with how police have amplified their responses to protest generally. However, such a response is particularly likely to occur when the threat of Black insurrection looms (Passavant 2021). Joel's interpretation of specific sounds caused by police interventions enabled him to document evidence of what he considered police misconduct.

### *Seeing police: actions, behaviors and gestures*

Residents also relied on another sensory mechanism to recognize camera cues: observation. Owen, a 44-year-old resident, witnessed police conduct violent searches that informed how he processed police conduct visually. Based on these experiences, Owen believed that police often go out of their way to denigrate Black people. Following the widespread public disapproval of footage showing Laquan McDonald's fatal final moments, Owen recognized a renewed utility in recording police. During one encounter, Owen observed officers prevent family members from entering the scene of a shooting that resulted in a young man's death. Owen realized that the officers' conduct deviated from the type of treatment that shooting victims and their relatives should receive:

Me seeing the hurt and the pain of the people who found out their loved ones [were] lost. How they are trying to run up in the store like that, and the police pushed them off. ... There was a shooting down at Harold's before Harold's closed. [The police] were down there. They got in an argument with the police, and I thought I better put this on record. It might turn ugly.

In seeing officers use force against residents mourning the loss of a family member, Owen deployed his cellphone based on identifying his neighbors' relative powerlessness and the officers' unwarranted response. As a bystander observing a scene, Owen used his vision to interpret both the grieving residents and the officers to document a potentially harmful situation with his cellphone.

Bystanders who recorded police risk becoming targeted victims, thereby experiencing the police violence and abuses they intended to prevent. As police stopped another Black man, Jordan, a 47-year-old man, combined his legal knowledge with an interpretation of the situation to determine when to deploy his cellphone: "One time we pulled up at a gas station, and the police just pulled up on one dude because he got tinted windows. I don't feel that there was no reason for him and pull up, so I started recording him." In light of his previous experiences, Jordan surmised that this traffic stop was a display of power and legal violation rather than an attempt to achieve neighborhood safety: "... figured he's going to do something to violate this man's constitutional rights .... It was more of 'I'm in control ....' He was down on the young man." Jordan used his cellphone to challenge asymmetrical power relationships between a Black man and a police officer, and he also brought himself closer to police violence: "I was recording, and the police came over and smashed my phone." While Jordan's experience revealed violence and destruction of property as risks incurred when recording police, this experience also presented Jordan with another source of legal knowledge. Specifically, Jordan learned to stand further away while recording police: "Now we learned to where when we do record, you stay a distance from them. It was too close."

Along with learning to interpret the sounds that guns generated, residents also interpreted officers' deployment of guns as a visual signal that preceded police misconduct. Kaleb, a 34-year-old resident who experienced frequent police raids while living in public housing, has learned to attach visual significance to police interactions that begin with firearms. When facing a similar interaction, Kaleb analyzed officers' initial deployment of their firearms as a signal of their intention to use deadly force: "I'm on my way to work in uniform, I get off the bus ... hence we go, gun out and saw the police. I recorded what happened. They destroyed both my phones." According to Kaleb, the presence of firearms represented a lack of assurance that these officers were operating fairly and deviated from the use-of-force continuum that reflects widely accepted behavioral norms (see Skogan 2023). Kaleb's experience revealed how some officers reclaim authority over citizens by restricting what is knowable, even destroying citizen property if they deem it necessary.

### *Seeing and hearing police: interpreting police verbal and physical behaviors*

By recording police conduct on cellphones, residents also induced behavioral changes in officers by shifting their outward displays toward procedural justice (Sandhu 2016; Sandhu and Haggerty 2017). For Ace, prior experiences demonstrated that officers' initial body language and gestures served as evidence of future breaches of power. During a subsequent interaction, an officer shouted at Ace and encroached on his personal space:

When he walked up to the car, he just came off aggressively. When he came off aggressive, that's what made me instantly start recording, being all in the

window, and stuff, talking a little loud, because like I said, it was just the railroad. You ain't got no reason to be all aggressive with me.

Ace described recording police behaviors as a response to how the officer spoke and interacted with him, indicating how he understood the officer's verbal expressions as evidence of an inclination to engage in future misconduct. Furthermore, Ace tied officers' outward displays to police misconduct, which triggered his distrust and enabled him to deploy his cellphone as a protective response:

You're an officer of peace, act like it. Stop just hopping into trying to be real aggressive with me when all I did was roll over the railroad tracks. You ain't got no reason to be aggressive with me. You're acting like a just fled a crime scene ... that just be rubbing me the wrong way with the police, so I don't trust them.

Crucially, Ace's recording of police behavior motivated officers to adapt their conduct: "Once I started recording, he was just a little bit more calm about himself, his tone in his voice changed, his body language changed. He wasn't all in the window as much." As a result of this experience, Ace concluded: "I still turned my camera on, but I also learned more as far as how to deal with officers."

Vicarious experiences influenced residents like Juan to use their cellphones to resist unwarranted police intrusions. On one occasion, as he was walking home, Juan recalled hearing police officers say that members of the New Era Chicago possessed guns and observed police confiscating one of the community member's car. This situation corresponded with Juan's perception, acquired from watching an online video, that police officers unfairly target members of this local community group. Anticipating police misconduct, Juan used his cellphone to record this exchange:

[the police say] 'Oh, you know we got these [non-profit] people with guns, and they're threatening me ...' And then the lieutenant moves and [says] 'we gonna have to take the car.' So, I ended up pulling out my phone and getting on *Facebook Live* and started recording [as] they did their search.

Juan continued recording until a police lieutenant arrived and concluded that there was insufficient evidence for an arrest and property seizure: "...[the] lieutenant from the district ... like yeah man I'm sorry, I don't know why they were gonna take the car when there's not gun in the car." In this instance, Juan acted on localized knowledge of police officers and their relationship to a local community group. Analyzing police and citizens, Juan linked a present police encounter to a past vicarious experience that shaped his distrust and recording of police.

As residents perceived police words and actions, some confronted another form of police misconduct: verbal threats and coercion. Silas, for example, observed and heard three white officers scolding and searching a group of young Black men. This situation was similar to the treatment Silas had frequently encountered from the police. After recognizing that police officers of white racial backgrounds were enforcing public

bodily exposure with elevated voices and issuing verbal commands, Silas recorded the encounter:

Three white cops, unmarked car, just pulling these young brothas [young Black men in their] early [to] middle twenties [over]. [Police] have them all stretched up on the car, got their pants down, shouting ... telling them what they gonna do, and what they not gonna do .... I stood there, and I was recording. Until one of the three cops walked over to me and [said] ‘get on, move on, you ain’t got no business here, you [are] interfering.’ How am I interfering standing here waiting on the bus? But I was tryna film. And he told me, you better not be filming this.

When one of the police officers raised his voice, Silas understood this shift as revealing the officers’ underlying intentions. For Silas, the loudness of the officers’ voices conveyed a lack of self-control and an inclination to engage in misconduct. Thus, Silas used officers’ perceivable actions to determine when to invoke his distrust of police and deploy his cellphone to record them.

The analysis has shown how residents attribute significance to officers’ words and actions as situational factors that contribute to making police stops recording-worthy events. These words and actions corresponded with residents’ pertinent legal knowledge and informed their situated distrust of police. The acquisition, storage and retrieval of legal knowledge involved a series of ongoing processes. When residents recorded police, these experiences also served as another police contact that informed residents’ interpretation of succeeding police interactions. In each situation, residents displayed a legal consciousness inflected by awareness of racialized law enforcement patterns to interpret and anticipate asymmetrical power relationships between police officers and Black citizens. The data have also demonstrated that camera cues hold collective dimensions that influence how bystanders analyze police officers and citizens.

## Discussion and conclusion

This study connects research on the roles played by the senses and situated interpretations to demonstrate how Black men use cellphones as tactical tools to contest intrusive police contacts. Conceptually, camera cues attest to how frequent police contact operates as racial and legal socialization, influencing ways of sensing and interpreting officers, citizens and police–citizen interactions. The intense police surveillance that residents reported has generated many personal and vicarious experiences with police. During personal interactions, residents learned to recognize subtle shifts in officers’ comportment while negotiating the threat of injustice and injury. Even without direct exposure to the physical danger of injury, residents also accumulated legal knowledge from television, social media and personal networks regarding how police treat other citizens who share similarities based on race, gender, class and place.

With each personal or vicarious police encounter, residents adjust their perceptions of police, indicating how the senses operate as a source of cultural meaning about justice, fairness and power relationships. The variation in camera cues is a product of past experiences and situational contingencies. Some residents rely on words, others use

officers' physical actions, while others interpret officers' words and actions as camera cues. Thus, residents build legal knowledge through experiences with law enforcement, which influences how residents analyze future police encounters and anticipate police misconduct. The data indicate that residents transform symbols into signals for action in tandem with the availability of their cellphones, fear of injury or death, social ties to targeted citizens and commitment to procedural justice as racial justice.

Cellphones allow residents to creatively refashion networked communication flows enabled by the internet's capability to publicly share visual evidence to prove that police make their everyday encounters violent. This study demonstrates that countersurveillance is a practice of resistance that produces new power relationships alongside preexisting power relationships. While organized activists sign up for "witnessing shifts" (Huey et al. 2006), ordinary residents learn to witness shifts in police officers' behaviors and record them strategically. Such acts of resistance executed by ordinary residents using cellphones to instigate condemnation of police can impose benefits and penalties. Many residents use cellphones to actively resist police officers' attempts to control themselves and other citizens. Yet, such citizen countersurveillance is penalized by officers, who often use coercion, verbal threats, property destruction and physical assaults to reassert authority. By recording police, residents add another layer of oversight of authorized patterns of police surveillance and complement their roles as the policed with an additional role as policers of police.

This study extends sociolegal research in several ways. For legal cynicism research, the analysis shows how residents' situated interpretations of police officers trigger their distrust in specific officers and enable them to prepare for misconduct, thereby eliciting the use of their cellphones. With each police encounter, residents can acquire and analyze specific behavioral patterns and situational dynamics that forecast when legal actors are likely to engage in misconduct and, therefore, illegitimate and worthy of distrust. Individual encounters with police officers create distrust of how officers suspend individuals' sense of legitimacy or trust in legal actors. This situated form of distrust connects to individuals' broader legal estrangement that develops through their knowledge of police mistreatment. The findings suggest that legal cynicism research can benefit from examining the situational circumstances under which residents develop distrust toward legal actors and interrogate the legitimacy of the law. Researchers should also seek to understand how residents' distrust of legal actors might serve protective purposes and facilitate social bonds between residents.

For legal consciousness scholarship, the analysis of camera cues demonstrates how racialized personal and vicarious experiences with law enforcement shape the subjective interpretations and resistant actions of ordinary residents who rely on cellphones. While research on residents' vicarious exposure to legal actors is still nascent, this study reveals that understanding vicarious exposure to legal actors is vital to assessing how the law shapes an individual's legal consciousness. In particular, vicarious exposure to police allows individuals to refine their second-order legal consciousness and allows bystanders to produce similar results to targeted victims who recorded police. The findings also suggest that in settings saturated with racialized police misconduct, individuals can mutually constitute racial and legal consciousness to attend to the racially discriminatory operation of law enforcement. Legal consciousness scholarship can gain additional insights from analyses of how individuals develop commonsense understandings about the racialized enforcement of the law.

The prevalence of individuals recording police misconduct suggests that “camera cues” might exist outside Chicago. For example, in one of the most notable cases of police misconduct and violence, former Officer Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota. During the 2021 Chauvin trial, Darnella Frazier, a 17-year-old Black woman who recorded the now-viral video that depicts Chauvin suffocating Floyd to death, states: “It was like a natural instinct, honestly. The world needed to see what I was seeing.” While Frazier declares that she recorded the incident based on instinct, she later noted that she started to record “as soon as I heard him [Floyd] trying to fight for his life.” Like those of Ramsey Orta, who recorded the fatal moment where officer Daniel Pantaleo choked Eric Garner to death, Frazier’s statements correspond with this study’s findings that residents use cellphones based on situated sensory perceptions of symbols associated with police misconduct.

This study also has some limitations that open up new avenues for future research. First, the sample provides insights into how low-income Black men, a racialized, gendered and classed group, use cellphones based on past experiences with police officers. Residents with similar social locations might deploy their cellphones based on past interactions with legal authorities, understanding of their and others’ social statuses and situational interpretations of legal actors. Future research might explore how variations in the experiences of other groups lead to distinctive forms of camera cues. Second, this study examines what camera cues convey about police misconduct, but future research might explore when officers’ behaviors convey appropriate police conduct. Third, broader questions remain about how individuals perceive and use other recording technologies and cop-watching applications. As researchers continue to analyze police–citizen relationships, they should also explore in greater depth how ordinary residents develop perceptions of police and citizens, which inform the use of recording technologies.

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## Note

1. The interviews in this study are part of a larger study of Black men’s experiences with the criminal legal system, the majority of whom had not recorded police behaviors at the time of the interview.

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