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**Withdrawing or Drawing In? Political Discourse in Policed Communities**

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**Abstract**

A growing body of literature explores the ways in which direct or vicarious contact with forms of state surveillance affects political behavior and perceptions of government legitimacy. We develop a new method, Portals, to collect conversations between residents from highly policed areas in five different US cities collected between 2016 and 2018. While existing research emphasizes the ways in which interactions with the carceral state are alienating and demobilizing, our analysis of these conversations reveals that police encounters also shape the civic discourse of citizens in race-

class subjugated communities. Interactions with policing, that is, are not only destructive but also generative: they lead citizens to construct and act upon civic sensibilities in the face of state oppression. These civic sensibilities, we argue, are centered on a logic of "collective autonomy" – given police ignorance, abuses of police authority, and the little political power that residents of race-class subjugated communities have to demand change, many conclude that power is best achieved by receding from state institutions in the short term and community-building in the long term.

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A large body of research in political science has argued that involuntary interactions with governing institutions that surveil, convict, and punish – namely criminal justice – are politically demobilizing moments of negative political socialization. For example, the finding that arrest and incarceration leads to a decline in voting among individuals and communities has been documented across several large representative samples, including those that measured changes in voting behavior after an arrest or conviction across multiple waves, in non-parametric analyses that matched those who had been incarcerated with those who would be in the future, and in studies that used random assignment to less and more punitive judges to estimate causal effects of brief jail confinement (Weaver and Lerman 2010; Lerman and Weaver 2014; White forthcoming; Burch 2013; Walker 2014; Gerber et al. 2017). So stunning have these findings been that scholars have begun to sound the alarm, arguing that criminal justice policies are altering the political clout of citizens and communities in America, diverting citizens from having a say in their government.

Here we advance this vibrant literature by exploring ways in which interactions with the criminal justice system are not solely destructive and alienating, but also constructive of civic action and thought. With a few important exceptions,[i] existing scholarship has attended primarily to the ways that involuntary experiences with the criminal justice system "cleaves citizens from the democratic polity" (Lerman and Weaver 2014, 111). Because of this focus, the literature has done substantially less to theorize and illuminate the forms of political expression that might exist within policed communities. Crudely, if unwittingly, scholars construct custodial citizens' politics as an anti-politics – a unilateral withdrawal from political activity.

Our study intervenes by exploring the range of political responses in highly policed communities using a technology and method that listens to political ideas, aspirations, commitments, and ideologies to build a ground up conception of political life. We argue that political responses revolve around two combined dynamics. First, and consistent with existing research, involuntary

police interventions incentivize broader, strategic retreat from engagement with the state. People engage the state not only because of a civic duty or expectation of substantive or material benefits, but because they have a basic trust that it will not dominate, humiliate, physically assault, or expose them to harm. "Warrior style" policing tactics that criminalize routine behaviors and result in arbitrary stops of residents as they move throughout the public space do the opposite – they deter citizen engagement with police and with the local government.[ii] Critically, this response is not solely a passive retreat as some literature suggests but an "ethics of aversion," "wherein nonengagement, as opposed to direct confrontation or submission, is utilized as a means to limit and reduce the range of interactions with members and institutions of the dominant group" (Hanchard 2006, 110; see also Cohen 2010 and the 'politics of invisibility').

Second, retreat is accompanied by another political stance – a drawing in toward community. By examining conversations between members of "race-class subjugated" communities (RCS; Soss and Weaver 2017), we uncover evidence that the political significance of police interactions begins with demobilization but does not end there, that avoidance of domination is a political strategy and practice, and that policed communities showcase a range of civic discourses in their resolve to preserve self and community. In short, we find evidence of a prominent discourse of collective autonomy – in which people respond to oppression in the criminal justice system by arguing for temporary withdrawal from formal political institutions *coupled with* deep community engagement, consciousness, and power-building, in order to both seek immediate relief from police incursions and improve opportunities for future collective struggle against police occupation.

After introducing the Portals technology through which the conversations were conducted, as well as our analytical approach, we describe collective autonomy and its central features. We then closely analyze three conversations that illustrate how collective autonomy is expressed, how it is voiced amidst differing belief systems, and its limits. Despite a variety of distinct experiences,

outlooks, and individual positions among Portals participants, a core narrative emerges of withdrawal from engagement with the criminal justice system *coupled with increased dedication to community-building, collective responsibility, and self-determination* as a solution to police oversight.

**Methodology**

Portals are gold shipping containers with immersive audio-visual technology that allow people in disparate places to connect intimately, as if sharing the same room. The Portals technology has two main virtues for facilitating organic conversations, and for underscoring the community's (and not the researcher's) authority over their narratives. First, the space itself feels secure, intimate, and does not require a facilitator (or researcher), allowing participants to converse freely and without oversight. Second, Portals are staffed by members of the community – curators – who in addition doing outreach and describing the study, also use the Portal to host community initiatives.

We placed Portals in eleven neighborhoods with high levels of police-citizen encounters located in five US cities—Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Milwaukee, Newark. Portals participants typically entered the box after walking by or after hearing about the project through word of mouth. After the Portals curators administered a brief iPad survey to acquire basic background information, a participant in one city would speak with participants in another for approximately 20 minutes about their perceptions and experiences with police. Each Portal dialogue was video recorded, transcribed, then coded for analysis. Between March 2016 and March 2018, approximately 866 Portals conversations were collected, though we focus on the 233 conversations between Black participants for the purpose of this paper. The median age of Portals participants was 36 years old, they had extensive experiences with police (48% had been stopped over 7 times), 55% had a high school education or less, and 59% reported that they rarely or never trusted police. Readers should refer to the online appendix for more details on the Portals method.

*Our Approach to the Analysis*

To approach the Portals data, we followed the constitutive and "active listening" approaches of scholars such as Katherine Cramer (2016) by coding conversation excerpts, mapping whole dialogues, identifying meta-themes across them, and triangulating accordingly. Our approach was an interpretive exercise in hearing their analysis take shape, and in particular, attending to how Portals participants use "everyday talk" to describe their civic responses to police encounters (Harris-Lacewell 2004). We began by coding excerpts[iii] within Portals dialogues where participants express a *response* to their experiences with policing, heeding Cathy Cohen's call to consider "the possibility of oppositional politics rooted outside of traditional or formal institutions," and allowing subjects to define civic agency on their own terms (2004, p. 32). Thus, whereas most surveys identify civic responses as those that are actively responding to institutions through voting, protest, petitions, or public meetings, we considered a civic response to be any form of engagement, adaptation, recommendation, or aspiration that flows from experiences with the criminal justice system.

Central to understanding collective autonomy is interpreting not only what participants do in response to police encounters, but also what they aspire to do. We remained attentive to this distinction while coding participant responses.[iv] After coding the dialogues for responses and characterizing them accordingly, we looked for patterns across the dialogues (Cramer 2016; Miles and Huberman 1994). By doing so we observed that often when two Black participants are speaking to one another, their responses were aspirational, focused on visions of unity, or coming together as a community. We also took notice of what expressions were not present, observing that responses that hinged on assimilation, integration, or moral suasion had less abiding hold. And perhaps ironically, the most common response where participants expressed agency was not collective action or any active form of engagement; instead they retreated from public life. These responses, taken together, constitute what we call a logic of collective autonomy.

When diving deeper into the responses, we saw variation *within* collective autonomy responses. Calls for unity, for instance, have many different faces, a finding consistent with other analyses of discourse, in which the same phrase (i.e. "coming together") may take on different meanings across different contexts; we also find that different phrases may take on similar meanings (Soss 2002). We began to log these meta-themes. To better understand these distinctions and resonances, we returned to the dialogues themselves, mapping their structure, examining how participants connected and clashed along various thematic lines, considering who listens and who leads, and at what points (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Mishler 1991). For instance, a participant may disavow the police upon sharing a personal or vicarious encounter with them. Two female participants may waffle between a desire for protection and an antipathy for police treatment of their sons after connecting on experiences as mothers. Their dejection about reform may arise in moments after reflecting on failed measures of the past – or reflections on the past may give rise to suggested antidotes to anti-Black violence. These pivot points are central for understanding how civic behaviors flow directly from treatment by the criminal justice system.

After examining a wide range of conversations in the next section, we dive more deeply into three Portals dialogues. We selected these dialogues not because they were "clean" articulations of collective autonomy, but rather the opposite. The conversations are not always linear, and participants try on different discourses that may be read as contradictory. We selected these conversations to demonstrate that belief systems can be messy; that they are worked out and worked over through experience, through borrowed frameworks, through rapport and discord with others.[v]

**Defining Collective Autonomy**

In this section, we more explicitly define collective autonomy by identifying the throughlines of collective autonomy discourse in the Portals conversations. Without imposing too much of a central tendency, we see four important features. The first feature is the action of

retreating from the state, while the next three are articulated as aspirations: coming together as a community, acknowledging structural barriers to doing so, and honing a collective consciousness.

*State Retreat*

First, and foundational, is immediate retreat from the state. In order to transcend police incursions and the possibility of state assault, the immediate imperative is to unburden oneself from the police. Across the body of conversations, we observe a generally confirmed wisdom that the way to deal with gratuitous police stops and the unsubtle gravitational pull into police oversight was to distance oneself in a very immediate sense. Experience suggested that it was necessary to limit one's interactions with the criminal justice system to preserve individual autonomy. Such expressions were often contained in a specific message to avoid enlisting the help of police. For just one example – there are many more – a woman from Baltimore who teaches her own children to have a favorable view of police explains why she and her neighbors are nonetheless reluctant to use their services: "Like I'd rather just deal with this than have the police come and shoot my son for acting a donkey or whatever…if I can avoid calling them…because I'm going to tell you, you call them and it gets worse, you know what I mean?...and it happens so fast, like they show up angry."

In addition, conversations also described a more *general* retreat from interaction with police (and sometimes also state) authority. Often, these were passing references to non-confrontation and disassociation, devoid of aspiration or deeper reflection: "I try to stay to myself and mind my business because things can go left at any moment"; "Right now, what I'm doing out here in the streets of Chicago, little bro, is staying to myself, minding my own business, and doing what I gotta do to survive in these streets as a black man"; "I avoid them [cops] because I know I ain't got a chance going up against them"; "keep your head low". Staying to oneself and avoiding ordinary association with friends and neighbors followed directly on the heels of experience with police; as a woman in Chicago put it: "The police…they got badges, they can do what they want. And it don't

make no sense. And they can harass you for no reason. I don't have my ID on me right now, but I'm not doing anything. 'I don't want you standing in this spot. You gotta move.' That's why I don't even hang out no more. There's no point in hanging out. I stay in my house every day." Such moments may appear not to be a political response at all, more in the realm of personal habit, devoid of political meaning; apathetic and anemic. We would argue, instead, that because they are a strategic method of denying police an opportunity to confront them, and thereby deny them a sliver of their power to redefine them as subject, such disengagement with an authority understood to be restrictive of one's citizenship *is also a political choice*.

But there is something else of significance in the brief voicing of retreat. Such expressions rarely linger there. They travel from immediate individual autonomy to a more expansive vision of community power and protection. Thus, this withdrawal response is not passive retreat but is an active, intentional political stance and one that is accompanied by a coherent response that prioritizes investing in community autonomy and collective personal responsibility. For instance, two people spanning the miles between Chicago and Baltimore voice a disavowal of police and necessity of avoidance but they end at a communal aspiration:

> *C175: Right. I don't bother them and I hope they don't bother me. I don't have no- no ... it's like, let them do them. Let them stay over there. I'm gonna stay over here, you hear me? I just trying to ... no confrontation as much as possible.*
>
> *B309: Especially, like, I don't like- like I don't try to give them anything to- to be on me about, you know what I mean? I stay the fuck away from 'em, you know what I mean? I don't trust them.*
>
> *C175: …Under the radar, that's- that's ... you don't want to be one of these people that everybody knows, all eyes always on you, 'cause one false move and you can really mess up your whole life by either dead or jail or something like that, you know? So I- I try to stay out the way. That's pretty much it.*

*B309: Yeah, I try. I try my best man to stay ... to just like, keep a distance. And- and just sadly man, it don't really have to be like that though.*

*C175: Right. It really doesn't. It really doesn't but the world so fucked up, like, people don't even understand that if we come together, a lot could just be resolved.*

In the conversations, ideas of immediate retreat and turning inward to the community to build and defend against police were often blended together. Throughout the dialogues, we observe the aspiration of community solidarity was linked to the necessity of not abdicating our protection to a third party – the police. As one 25 year old male participant in Chicago put it: "Until we all wake up and come together and start pushing this black agenda…We are trying to police ourselves. No more call the police. Stay out of their way. Stop trying to look to them for protection. Stop getting in trouble with other people on the street. Trying to use their services to come lock niggas up…. Stop believing in their paperwork. All together. Yeah, we definitely need to do that." The clarion call to avoid police interaction or service – retreat – is also part of the search for collective autonomy.

Readers familiar with historical black nationalism, "one of the oldest and most enduring traditions in American political thought" (Shelby 2003, 665), will recognize that many of these arguments originate in this longstanding ideology. The idea of collective autonomy may be linked to policing as a particular form of state oppression in our time but it has deep roots: "Since Reconstruction, African Americans' notions of autonomy have included not only personal autonomy and liberty… but a community-based concept of autonomy" (Dawson 2001, 27). Despite the fact that it was and remains one of the single most embraced ideologies in the black citizenry, many in our field have underappreciated its claims and prominence in the black counterpublic (Dawson 2001, 30). Fewer still of our criminal justice colleagues have identified police encounters at as an antecedent to the articulation of views of black autonomy, self-determination, and communal self-reliance. Across Portals dialogues, several core arguments form this political discourse.

*Coming Together: Black Self Determination*

Because they had long ago recognized disinheritance – "America has never loved you, bro" – the community's transformation and salvation from police depended instead on the community banding together as one. This was as often stated in the negative: because we cannot depend on others to help us or regard us (police are motivated by money and lockups, not our wellbeing), and in the absence of state's ability to interact with us reasonably or give us dignity, we must come together to improve the health of our families, communities, and institutions. Calls to stop depending on others were followed by the need to strengthen ourselves by "come[ing] together," "stand tall together", and to "harvest our own." As a female participant in Chicago said, "if you just said, fuck them, get up, and do it for yourselves, then we wouldn't need them. And we can show them like, hey, we don't need y'all. They scared of us, like, for real, for real." In its various meanings, there was a shared idea that if the community "got on one accord," police would no longer have the upper hand. Police power would deflate as the power of the community increased. As we searched these conversations, it was not entirely clear how coming together would happen, what it would look like, or how exactly it would deliver them from police occupation. Narrow policy prescription wasn't the prize; aspiration for a different future was.

There was a more conservative variant of this aspiration and a more radical one, though they are closer than they first appear. The more conservative expression usually occurred within a "clean our house first" vocabulary. These conversations voiced an impatience with offending over and above police actions and a demand to snuff out the gangs and vice (occasionally with threats of street justice). How can we expect them to take our community seriously, they opined, when we flaunt disrespect for our own? These conversations argued for a responsibility to the community to correct their own people and abolish destructive forces, and sometimes this was seen as preceding

united opposition to the police ("we got a hell of lot more on the whole community – black people, before we can even begin to think about what the fuck somebody else could do for us.")

The promotion of community reliance was also voiced more radically, through the explicit pursuit of power to govern ourselves. These conversations argued for self-determination, which was two-pronged: actual community control of police and authority to resolve intra-community conflict. Many conversations proposed the idea that policed communities should patrol (and govern) their own neighborhoods and cease ceding power to those who do not understand the community or care very much about its wellbeing. These conversations often see little role for existing police and seeking improvement within their ranks was seen as akin to improving slavery. "We need to police ourselves" or "we can protect ourselves" was a fairly common phrase, often coming directly out of the idea that police had shown that they could not handle the job and had no sense of the communities they were charged to police or were unnecessary: "Um, just leave black people alone. Just leave us alone. We don't need you to come in and tell us how to act. We don't need you to police us. We don't need that. You have no idea. You think you have a idea because you studied us. But you don't know us. You know what I'm saying? Um, what I ... they just need to ... we need to police ourselves. Stop coming in our community with preconceived ideas and notions based upon your study of how you should respond to a particular situation."

There was a common belief that communities themselves could fix things going wrong without police, and this is a place where we also see retreat colliding with communal responsibility to protect: "Rule number one; no cops ever. Don't ever call them. We'll settle it ourselves. Like men. That's the way we did it and we didn't have the problems that we do now. We didn't have people rolling up on us just jumping out. They lock you up, they'll find anything." But sometimes calls to police their own lives were located in a more conservative discourse, not meant to replace police authority but to acknowledge the community's uncommon insights and unmatched presence as

giving them authority to defend the neighborhood. Very few people had actualized this vision for community patrols, with the exception of a woman in Los Angeles who called the Nation of Islam's peaceful security force to mediate a conflict.

Coming together also had an economic dimension, as the excesses of police oversight came back to not "controlling our resources." Keeping money in the community and spending with each other could disrupt the white monopoly of resources; investing in local black enterprise was a means to develop the necessary infrastructure for autonomy ("you know the only way we really gonna be taken seriously man, you know I mean, is off the economics"). At times, these discussions would reference other racial and ethnic minorities who have, in participants' eyes, built more politically and economically dependent enclaves (e.g. "Chinatown is Chinese spending money with they race").

*Impediments to Unity*

If a solid faith in unity and collective responsibility (or its logical extreme – control) was the solution to police steamrolling their communities and the rigged institutional arrangements that bring it about, unity was a difficult thing to reach, because of those very conditions. Coming together is necessary for our survival, the argument went, but we are all so busy struggling *to survive*, we cannot come together. Conversations often spend as much effort describing the conditions that prevent unity, and the police predation enabled by disunity. Being divided was what stunted their power, held them collectively back, and opened the way for state violence. For example, a young Black woman in Baltimore said:

> *I feel like they target a lot of youth, because the lack of togetherness. Our youth is so against each other. They always shooting each other and killing each other, so we so divided it's easy to attack them… if we was as … we would be stronger...It's easy to … with somebody that stand alone. Our people not standing together. We're not being strong to what make us any easy target for the police. Yeah, they play a big role, the police are 90% of the problem, but the other 10% fall back on our people because we don't come together.*

Coming together then is not only a positive aspiration with intrinsic value; not coming together exacerbates police oppression. It was stunning how often people argued that interpersonal violence was an open invitation for police raining down on them. Police see evidence of us not sticking together (robbing and shooting), the argument goes, so they know they have a free pass to kill us: "If we do not get together and show these people that we can love each other, they are going to keep on doing what they are doing."

They viewed their neighborhood as culpable, therefore, by putting themselves in the predicament to have police come in in the first place. Collective exhaustion with the violence and with the police response were adjoined. Many wistfully recalled an earlier time when their own communities were united before coming apart, decimated by drugs, the police, or both; they yearned for "strong leaders" like King and Malcolm X who were nowhere around; they shook their heads at the community's tendency to set its own businesses and streets alight when protesting police killing. Again, the notion of "we hold ourselves back" comes to the fore, but it is often in short reach of an external entity - the police - who promote snitching, turning, and division; as one recounted, "the laws try to take a motherfucker from the hood that holds the hood together." At the same time, division was difficult to escape because conditions of domination prevent unity; we can't come together, the logic went, because we have so little and what little we have "we got to grind for it". They ended up moving like "crabs in a bucket," each one trying to get out by standing on the others back. But this was a double bind; if conditions occasion disunity, only unity begets freedom ("the only people that's gonna save us is us. You can't expect your enemy to save you.").

*Collective Consciousness and Redefinition*

Another component in this civic discourse was the idea that community power depended on a collective consciousness, and this consciousness was impeded by not knowing blacks' origins and unique cultural greatness. In order to see the problem fully, the idea went, we had to learn our

history and know our past, and not the "invented past" told to us by those in power or imposed by integration. For example, participants reminded each other of the origin of police in the slave patrol. Sometimes, this idea was voiced as a forgetting – our history as "God's originals" as African "kings and queens" as the builders of great civilizations and the chosen; other times it appeared as a more modest reclamation of black pride and redefinition (i.e. we are inherently creative, talented, hardworking, peaceful people who with parallel resources to whites would beat them in this game). Somewhere along the way, though, we had lost our sense of culture. Thus, turning inward meant not only self-government and economic reliance, but bolstering awareness of our history and possibilities and being free from the ignorance of ourselves that the law imposes. It was incumbent on the group to redefine themselves, to start "telling and controlling our narrative" and resist political and media storylines that criminalize them. Some even suggested that without this knowledge, authorities can take advantage of them and thwart the realization of their gifts.

In sum, collective autonomy responses constitute a dominant framework across conversations, flowing from a desire for liberation from police abuse and connected to retreat/ withdrawal imperatives. Retreat alongside calls for community autonomy/solidarity is not symbolic, narrowly self-interested, or a moral duty but justice-oriented, grounded in personal and communal protection and survival. Highly-policed citizens don't choose between exit, voice and loyalty, in the famous words of Albert Hirschman. Instead they combine elements of exit from traditional state involvement along with loyalty to their group. Thus retreat and solidarity are two sides of the same coin: residents seek safety through retreat in the short term and seek unity and power in the long term. We now turn to a deeper exploration of how these ideas go hand in hand now through three conversations that encompass different aspects of the collective autonomy narrative.

**Conversation Analysis: Tracing Autonomy and Retreat in Three Exchanges**

Conversation 1: "I'm for walking in our neighborhoods. I'm not with the walking to the police station"

In this conversation, we observe how collective autonomy emerges through ideas of Black self-determination: the need for the community to set its own rules, govern its own people, and develop independent economic power to free themselves from police and state subjugation. Both participants are Black men in Milwaukee and Chicago, who are in their late 30s/early 40s, have a high school education, have had high levels of contact with police, and maintain low levels of trust in police. They are both Black men living in poor, majority-Black communities and fathers, and both designate themselves as informal leaders—mentors to young men in their neighborhoods. They both articulate a concern for Black men, while women receive no mention throughout the dialogue.

The Chicago participant begins the conversation by immediately anchoring his ideals in self-determination. He introduces himself as a businessman concerned with Black economics and spreading these ideas through his community. Yet his concept of collective autonomy is multi-faceted, weaving together several frameworks.

> *C86: We gotta have something to pass down to our children's children, you know what I'm sayin, so, I preach that hard man, the black economics thing. I'm for walking in our neighborhoods. I'm not with the walking to the police station. It's not gonna change nothing, you know what I'm saying? We have to change within ourselves. Community...you know with us being unified first. That's more what I'm saying with the whole thing. That's why I click with certain brothers that's, you know, like-minded and we hit the hoods, you know what I'm saying? We don't just be hitting any old place. We go to the hoods to show black love and spring black love and chant black love and black power, things like that. And you know, like, chop it up with the people.*

In this introduction, the Chicago participant introduces Black self-determination as a central concept. He also describes its contours, first by replacing the utilization of police with community-

based alternatives—a logic rooted in retreating from dominant institutions ("I'm for walking in our neighborhoods. I'm not with the walking to the police station"). He then proposes creating Black solidarity through acts of community responsibility and unity ("We have to change within ourselves. Community…with us being unified first") and by redefining dominant conceptions of Black life and worth ("show black love and spring black love…). These concepts reverberate throughout the Chicago participant's reflections, at times converging and other times contrasting with Milwaukee participant's vision of self-determination, which prioritizes community *control* of political institutions and uses language of individual responsibility in his articulation of collective autonomy.

The Chicago participant's reflections lead the Milwaukee man to respond with a critique of Black pastors, whom he admonishes for their distance from community life ("If you got money, pay our dues, pay our all. But, we know what's going on out here in the streets. We drive around the streets every day. Your church in the ghetto but you don't live in the ghetto"), and their distorted priorities ("But they don't want to preach about that…They talk about the black on black violence"). This critique represents the Milwaukee participant's own flavor of self-determination, which focuses on informal and formal institutional control. Toward the end, he calls on the community to mobilize and elect new representatives across levels of the political system to return authority back to the communities. It is worth noting that this form of political self-determination is uncommon; rarely do participants speak about electoral engagement or external representatives. Here, however, the engagement he calls for is not to make current representatives more responsive but to displace them (i.e. community control of politics); it is to shift the balance of power back toward the community by putting in power officials who will hire police not just in the community but *of* the community ("hire these cops who don't live here" or "know what you going through every night"). Electoral influence here, crucially, is in the service of community control. The community members need to *take responsibility for community control* by going to the ballot box.

*M85: That's why I'm telling, I want to say to like us black men? It's everything like, people trying to say white peoples trying to hold us down. It's like no they ain't holding us down, it's us. You gotta get up, you gotta go and vote for your aldermen, senators, counselors. Vote for mayor! You voting the white man, you doing little for your community… They hire these cops who don't live here and drive two hours away to come work in your community.*

*C86: Exactly.*

*M85: They don't know what you going through every night They don't know you got…*

*C86: Right. They don't don't what's up with nothing. They just see what they think they see is a nigger, an animal.*

*M85: Mhmm. And only thing you can do is keep talking, keep preaching to the black man. It take, it take a tremendous change. But we gotta get the right people in, the right justice in, the right district attorney in, the right chiefs, the right sheriff in.*

*It's all- just don't go vote when it time for the president.*

*C86: Right.*

*M85: When the, when it's in your community. When it's leaders who basically made that cause for your community.*

*C86: Yeah, that's real. Thats real and we need to start up little by little. We just keep on chopping it up but we got to keep on gaining though. You know? That's what we got to keep on doing: keep on gaining-*

In this conversation, self-determination flows from police disavowal. Both participants believe that police fail to understand the conditions of their lives ("They don't know what you going through every night") and that the police confine them to dehumanizing racial scripts ("They just see what they think they see is a nigger, an animal"). They also see the police as an imminent threat who operate with a fear and recklessness that make Black lives expendable. This results in two

responses that recur throughout the Portals dialogues: to avoid police at all costs and to act when police intervene in the lives of others. The need for collective accountability derives from extreme responses of police to black men and the absence of accountability for such responses. In the following exchange, the Milwaukee man describes doing the former, and Chicago, the latter.

> *M85: Right and like, like with all the cop shootings going on, like, I know I got family members who been in the military. I got family members who been police officers and everything and they tell me, like today, you might as well don't even step out and pull up in front of the police station nowadays cause you start right here and don't even know what's going on. Switch on that camera they got, I could easily turn this off. Now somedays, I might get pulled over and start right here in the middle of the street. I know I'm carrying, I know I got a gun, I know I got all this stuff on me. I'm gonna pull up in front of the police station, be like ay for my life I don't want to get shot. I might pull out ID? I don't wanna get shot pulling out my ID and social security.*
>
> *C86: It's crazy. We gotta have our hands up, you know with the, and that's...I seen it man [laughs] A young brother- it was like four of them deep in the car- I just kind stood by and watched, I didn't even leave because I saw them pulling them over. I feel like we all gotta be accountable for each other now.*
>
> *M85: Mhmm.*
>
> *C86: All the brothers had their hands up and it's sad we got to do that but that was smart of them to do that though. Because they had four police cars that done stopped on these young brothers and they didn't look like they was doing nothing, you know what I'm saying? So it's like we gotta do all this precautionary type things just to live and survive and it's crazy but we kinda got to do it right now.*
>
> *M85: Right. I still have to have my ID and everything out before you get to the car. … you nervous that I'm gonna pull something out? You need to call backup. If you feeling nervous. You feel like*

*I'm going to do something to you? Don't push my car until you got another squad coming…You know what you doing. You have a choice. You made that choice to pull that trigger.*

While self-determination is the centerpiece solution to police violence, both participants complement this framework with several other ideas of collective autonomy. For instance, flowing from this dialogue of police disavowal comes language of collective responsibility for one another rooted in solidarity, resilience, and historical memory ("I feel like we all gotta be accountable for each other now"). Here, the ways in which police incite logics of autonomy is straightforward. Police oppress us ("It was your choice to pull that trigger"), we can't claim protection/remedy based on group worth ("black already means nothing to America at the end of the day"), and we don't have power to stop them ("justice means just us. So they not dealing with the consequence"). Thus, we need to get the power to impose consequences, which requires structure, unity, and money. As in many dialogues, the participants invoke historical map makers of resistance. In the exchange below, it is Malcolm X and Dr. King; in others, it is the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam.

*C86: That's it, that's it. And deal with the consequences but you know, justice means just us. So they not dealing with the consequence so that's why I feel like we need to get some power. Cause we need to be able to deliver. See we ain't got no money so we ain't got no say so. You know, black already means nothing to America at the end of the day. But we also have no type of structure, no type of unity, and no type of power. So our voice don't mean nothing although we're screaming, you know, and chanting black power and unity. We ain't got no power cause we ain't got no money, you know. We gotta build some type of structure so that when they do stupid, because they gonna keep on doing it. They ain't gonna stop. But when we get some power, when we hold down the whole block, the whole area, and we do march for real that time? They gonna have to make move then. Like the Malcolm X movie, you know what I'm saying? When they marched up there and they had to send dudes to the hospital?*

*M85: Yeah.*

*C86: That was power. You know what I'm saying? We ain't got that power no more, we gotta get that back.*

*M85: Right and just the same way as what Martin Luther King and like it was just he stopped doing, he stopped doing just black- killing black people. He said everybody in poverty: Whites, Mexicans, Spanish… That's why they killed that man. Because he brought everybody who has problems, trying to get them together and raise a bigger cause.*

What flows from this discussion is an argument for forging a collective consciousness through redefinition: regaining control of narratives of Black life and culture, affirming Black worth, creativity, and magestic history ("look before we slaves we was kings, period. It's not in our history books but we can find it though"). This rhetorical strategy may also include counterposing dominant narratives; notice here the moment when the Milwaukee participant highlights the submergence of "white on white crime." In fact, throughout the Portals dialogues, police are often redefined as institutional incarnations of racialized social control. Both of these practices occur at various points in the conversation. At one point, the participants note that limited political and economic power leaves these histories submerged ("It's there, they don't want to put it in the history book…somebody who privileged in the ghetto, we can't get up and take a private jet and go see Egypt, Russia, Africa. So, it's there, it's proof that black people is kings"). Below participants define men in their communities as leaders of the collective autonomy to which they aspire:

*C86: You know, we got to go and hit the hoods and talk to them like hey either we gonna have to flip this and turn this into some power or this even gonna have to stop because it's damaging the hood, it's damaging us.*

*M85: Definitely damaging the hood, definitely. But you could put all you time in flipping this work. I know some black men out here got real estate license. I know the black man out here got the broker license.*

*C86: Barber shop, laundromat [laughs] All type of- landscapers- you know we can create our own thing. We got some brothers who talented and gifted in the mind man. We can start building...Man, seeing ten brothers out there shooting each other, same ten brothers can get together and form some type of business at the end of the day. Mow grass or something. Take over what the Mexicans doing.*

*M85: Right. Grass. [laughs [00:52:15] Yeah we harvest, we get it, we started that. You know? We started that farming. Know what I'm saying? No more black farms and now... Like, stuff we need in our communities. Stop going to the white man for everything. There's stuff you can do on your own, stuff you can grow in your own. You can harvest your own stuff.*

This conversation powerfully highlights that community autonomy is texturally rich, anchored by a central strategy, then complemented and complicated by others. In this dialogue, to achieve self-determination participants propose a variety of collective strategies that are marbled throughout the dialogue. On one hand, they each consider the need to bolster community unity and pride ("We go to the hoods to show black love and …chop it up with the people"). On the other, one participant expresses the need for individual responsibility: if the community fails to stick together and solve its own conflicts, the police have an excuse to intervene ("You could easily talk this out. You don't have to go gun violence all the time. That's how you get the police involved now."). In the short term, however, participants engage in various acts of retreat from police engagement along with dedication to community power. One walks the streets to promote community safety and acts as a bystander during police encounters while the other lectures brethren on conflict resolution.

<u>Conversation 2: Communal Autonomy Discourse in a Conversation between Women</u>

Our next conversation is between two women in the early 30s. We showcase a conversation between women because often their experiences diverge considerably from men in highly policed communities. Studies show that compared to their male counterparts, women are more likely to contact police and are less likely to be stopped by them; but Black women are not necessarily more likely to trust them, or are more likely to have what Monica Bell refers to as "situational trust", where trust is contingent on particular forms of police engagement (2016). These trends play out across our sample, and to a certain extent, in the following conversation. The Chicago participant, a Black woman who identifies as a college graduate, reports never being stopped by police but maintains low trust nonetheless. The Milwaukee participant, a Black woman who describes herself as having attended some college, reports having been stopped between 5 and 7 times in her life (the most recent time being in the past month) and rarely trusts police.

This conversation includes a wide range of pointed critiques of policing and the criminal justice system, many of which are based in direct experience. The collective autonomy borne out of these critiques is concerned with self-reliance: the notion that communities should turn inward to enable safety. These critiques, made by both participants and numerous points throughout the conversation, include the complaint that cooperating with the police leads one to be accused of a crime; that police originated from the slave patrol and are still "just all out for blacks" today; that police prefer to punish people than rehabilitate them ("they don't look for solutions. They look for lockups"); that police rape; that they murder; that they create crimes in order to stay in business; that they are capricious ("Y'all just being, you know what I'm saying, making stuff up so y'all could fuck with us"); that they know little about the community they are policing (one respondent makes a comparison to the military occupying another country); that their purpose is to protect businesses and property rather than human beings; and that their presence causes increased crime.

Prior to the excerpt below, the woman in Milwaukee had been talking about cases in which the police behaved in a fashion that was both racist and unnecessarily punitive. She concludes, "instead of them trying to have a type of where they can rehabilitate these kids, they rather lock 'em up…Police always look at the bad part of you." Now, as the excerpt below shows, the woman from Chicago builds on this critique to make a more general statement, portraying the police as an external force, a "third party," similar to a military occupation. The solution, then, is to recognize that they are the enemy and to stop trusting them. That, in turn, requires developing the capability to solve our own problems – a capability we used to have but now have lost.

*C27: I think police are a third party military type source...and shouldn't really be in the neighborhood unless there's a war zone. So, basically, stationed there like we are the enemy.*

*M96: Yeah.*

*C27: And regardless of how much we think we trust them, we are their enemy.*

*M96: Yeah.*

*C27: So, it doesn't matter if it's a good boy, a bad boy, a old man, a young woman, a baby.*

*M96: Yes.*

*C27: It's a war zone. So, they need to leave. How did we used to do it in the old days when something happened in the house, something happened in the hood? We know who to speak to, we know who to go to. Now we gotta have the police who's a third party that don't know us, don't know the community, don't know- and we trusting them?*

Because the police are an external force that views them as an enemy, the woman from Chicago proposes a solution based in a collective autonomy that includes a) retreating from seeking police engagement and b) self-reliance and turning toward those in the community who understand them.

At this point the woman from Milwaukee makes an additional critique, which is that some individual police are mentally unstable, some of whom are also racist, leading them to become

violent. She references a case in which a police officer woke up a man sleeping on a park bench and in the ensuing confrontation, shot and killed him. In the below excerpt, the woman from Chicago responds by extending her recommendation to build collective autonomy, arguing that "we, as a community" need to learn the history of police, stop engaging them, learn what power we have to dismantle them, and replace them with our own police force, going on strike if we must. To this the woman from Chicago agrees, and even extends this idea further, advocating for a refusal to pay taxes for the police salaries and for a reliance on the community for protection.

> *M96: And we have a lot of cops like that, that we don't even know about. And I always tell people this, like, if you got people in your family that's ADHD, schizophrenic, suicidal, guess what? The police force does too. We don't need those type of people running around our cities killing us. Cause them the type of people that's killing us. That's like the third cop that done said that they had a mental, you know, thing going on with his self. So y'all let mental people protect and serve?*
>
> *C27: Well, that- that's the piece is that we, as a community, have to know how they came into existence.*
>
> *M96: Right.*
>
> *C27: We have to also make sure that we know what our authority and their authority is. Sometimes they come in as if we gave them the permission to. And if we keep calling 'em and keep giving them permission to come, then they're gonna continue. We have that power and authority to dismantle the police in our community and the thing is that how do we teach and let people know in those community that they have the power to do so. We have the power to have our own, I guess, patrol...*
>
> *M96: Yeah.*
>
> *C27: ...that we design, that we create. So that's the one thing. It's like, how did they come into existence? Did they get corporate, unincorporate? Are they part of the government as a municipality? What are the legal ramifications for the existence of a police force?*
>
> *M96: Right.*

*C27: Then we can do the exact same thing. So, we no longer need that force. Whoever paying you- if you saying it's a taxpayer thing- if it's a taxpayer, then we have the right to dismantle and create our own.*

*M96: And look...*

*C27: And that's a whole 'nother piece.*

*M96: And really, in real life, taxpayers, us, we do pay for them. They salary coming off of the lower class. The lower class people pays for policing, fire fighters, hospitals. Taxpayers pay for a lot. That's why I was telling people, like, we, us, as taxpayers, we do not have to fucking pay them. If they want to keep shooting us down and gunning us down, guess what? We all go on strike. Leave our jobs and how the fuck they gonna get paid? They not never gonna get paid because we the ones who pay them. The middle class pays for our aldermen, our governor...*

*C27: [laughs]*

*M96: ...so the police officers, and the fire fighters, and the doctors, they pay for the aldermen. Then they kids go to college, the pay for the governors, the congressmen. Now, we pay for the police, the fire fighters. They don't understand that. So, if we have to keep giving y'all our money and y'all gunning us down, guess what? I don't have to deal with that. I'm gonna be an entrepreneur where my money don't even go to the force.*

*C27: Yeah we gonna have to do something else. And that's the thing is that...*

*M96: And I can get my own black brothers and sisters to protect me. And police my own community.*

*C27: Yes.*

*M96: Cause we strong black brothers and women out here. They could do way better than what they doing and they know what's going on in our community.*

*C27: Yes.*

*M96: See what I'm saying? I'd rather for a person who to protect and serve us, they really know what's going on with Tyrone and Tasha. You know what I'm saying?*

Conversation 3: Collective Responsibility Nested in Individualist Orientations

In this conversation, we observe how collective autonomy discourse develops in a conversation strongly anchored in ideas of individual responsibility: the importance of respect and compliance in one's interactions with police, appreciation for the difficulty of police work, and a conversation that locates policing problems in individuals, not institutional or historical arrangements. This exchange is between two middle-aged Black men who coincidentally both grew up in the Altgeld Gardens (which they colloquially refer to as the Wild Hundreds, known for being home to many of Chicago's gangs and considered one of the most violent areas of the city).

The Chicago participant begins by establishing his general regard for the police. He states plainly that he "actually trusts the police" and "I don't have a problem with them." He gives a hypothetical scenario of being stopped if police "want to see what I'm up to" and explains that he would comply ("it's all about just giving them what they want and going on your way"), a recurrent theme in the ensuing conversation. Being stopped here for inconspicuous activity is not critiqued or rejected, but adapted to. Fault lies with those who don't know to just "give them what they want."

Despite listing that he had been stopped more than seven times by police, he offers the first explanation for police violence, one that will be affirmed by his conversation partner: "youth" who "don't respect the police enough so that's why the police react the way they do." He then offers a seemingly contradictory personal story about his sister, recounting her experience being stopped by police as an Uber driver "just yesterday." It is here that we see a critique emerge of police behavior (that they did not exercise proper judgment) and questioning the police practice of putting their hand on their gun, a critique that is housed within a general appreciation for the job police must do and the rationales for doubling up on their approach:

> *And so, she asked the one police officer who was getting her credentials why did this other man, this other police officer have to come stand next to her car because they're scaring her now. She was*

*scared. Well, I explained to my sister this: with the police these days, they have to protect themselves also. They have a job to do. I'm well aware of the job they have to do out on these streets. Um so one, two, three- however many police it takes to protect their fellow officer from being hurt, I understand that. But, in the same, in the same you know sentence that I'm using right now, you don't have to you know- you gotta make your proper judgement when you're pulling over people. My sister is not someone that's gonna hurt you, ok? So therefore you don't need your hand on your gun, or your taser, or nothing like that. Ok? Do what you gotta do and move around. Don't scare people like you're doing. A lot of people are scared of the police right now.*

The Chicago man explains that the police have taken him to jail a few times, but he accepts responsibility and acknowledges they did their job properly. A second critique of police behavior surfaces, turning quickly from the broad confidence he just spoke of. His earlier critique of the disrespectful postures of youth now joins a fierce and pointed questioning of police who protect themselves with guns ("you don't have to kill 'em all the time!"). Returning to the primacy of respect, this time of police ("they don't respect their training"), we see the violent imagery of police choking Eric Garner. However, his critique remains located in an individual 'bad apples' framing and directed at who have disregarded their training and are "doing they own damn thing."

*But if you give the police what they want when they ask for it, I feel that they are doing their job properly. And, and uh you know, it's a shame that they have to you know protect themselves from these kids these days the way that they do, you know? With their guns…You could use a taser, you could use a nightstick, you know bust 'em in the knee, knock 'em down, you know? You don't have to kill 'em all the time, you don't have to shoot 'em all the time! You don't have to do these things man. The guys selling cigarettes, they choked him half- choked the man out. For what? He's selling cigarettes man, that ain't no damn- that ain't nothing else but cigarettes! Why you choke him out? It's crazy man, it's crazy. Those are the bad police that I'm talking about. They shouldn't be on no force. They should not be on the force, simple as that. Because you*

*know what? They don't respect their training that they had when they were in class. They doing they own damn thing. That's all I got to say about it bro.*

The Milwaukee man shifts the conversation, describing his recent visit to Memphis and his touring of Beale Street, where it "grieved" his heart to witness police bedecked in artillery for a warzone. He laments police militarization before agreeing with his conversation partner that he "don't have nothing against the police". He then describes a turnaround in his own orientation to police. As he started living "righteous," he stopped regarding the police as "the enemy," voicing his appreciation "as long as they're not corrupt and they doing they job."

*I agree with you that you know what I'm saying me personally, I don't have nothing against the police. Today I don't because you know, uh, back in the days when I was a wicked individual, evil individual you know what I'm saying living the street life, living a life where I didn't care about nothing...To me they was the enemy then. So it was like, you know what I'm saying, me against them. You know what I mean? So...So being a upright citizen today and being a righteous endeavor today, you know what I'm saying- to not being a knucklehead as I was as a youth, you know what I'm saying- and being a mature adult you know what I'm saying, I see it different now. I see it like you know what I'm saying as long as they're not corrupt and they doing they job, I have no issue with 'em. I done shook they hand and said, you know what I'm saying, I appreciate you keeping our streets safe and things like that….I've had a chance to see they side of the view…*

The Milwaukee man then puts forward an argument, recounting his dialogue with Milwaukee police in a community discussion: "Y'all can't police our city for us." He plainly asserts his community's authority to police and distinguishes their unique position as coming from their continued presence. When the police end their workday – even after a job well done – they leave the neighborhood and city behind. "I'm here everyday, 24/7." Thus, his community cannot rely on police not because police aren't doing a satisfactory job, don't have enough manpower, or have racist intentions; rather,

external patrols operate at a remove and are no parallel to the people that are actually in the neighborhood on a constant basis. This authority is stated also as a responsibility – "I should be making sure the shorties safe." His conversation partner from Chicago offers spirited agreement, though does not elaborate the argument further.

> *M13: What I said- what I expressed to them police was that y'all alone can't police Milwaukee, you know what I'm saying? Y'all can't police our city for us. I said it's up to us to police our own city and make sure...*
>
> *C19: What you said, what you said, what you said.*
>
> *M13: You know what I'm saying? We live here daily. Y'all may live in Waukesha, or Racine, Kenosha, wherever y'all stay y'all gotta come down here to work. I'm here everyday, 24/7. Therefore- if I'm in the city 24/7 and I'm on the streets 24/7- then I should be making sure the shorties safe; I should be making sure that the elders safe; I should be making sure my mother, father, that my family safe; and making sure I'm safe. Because when it's all said and done, they go home after eight hours and do whatever they do. But I'm here 24/7. So it's- I should be the police of my city, not the police.*
>
> *C19: Exactly. I feel you.*

Next, the conversation quickly arrives at a second limit to police – injustice. Here, reliance on them is ill-advised not because they leave, but because they inflict harm. It is here that more solidaristic framings emerge, with the community now positioned as victimized by police. "I" becomes "we"; importantly, the argument is refashioned from a focus on individual behavior ("I know how to conduct and carry myself") to a collective identity group claim ("we done negotiating").

This begins a more intense part of the conversation as the Milwaukee man begins to give an impassioned sermon against police killing and routine disrespect. His earlier easygoing stance, one where he says he "has no issue" with police, moves toward an uncompromising, unrelenting position - any injustice "it ends here." There is no room for concessions - the police "can get right or get rolled on." He has located his authority over the police first because he is in the

neighborhood beyond the police clocking in and out, second, because of his almost biblical right to stand up against police injustice, and third, because his community stands with him. Of the arguments he tries on, this one is the most emotive, if unspecific. As the argument shifts, his cadence follows. The stakes are higher ("we got too many of our kids dying"), the terms are hardened ("by any means necessary"), the language more authoritative ("I got the right"). He demands more space than before. But the statements are high-flying, divorced from any specific methods of how he envisions confronting police and reclaiming authority and somewhat nondescript about the actual scope of the injustices taking place.

A complicated picture of police comes to the fore. On one hand, police as a whole are legitimate even if some within the ranks are corrupt. On the other, the injustice has "been going on for all the years that it's been going on" and has reached an unacceptable point – too many innocent kids dying, too many elderly in his neighborhood facing police disrespect. Before, he took on the role of a collective guardian of the community's safety from within; here, he takes on the role of a guardian against injustice from without. In this refashioned role, it is not his "24/7" presence in the neighborhood but his voice (and status as an upstanding, taxpaying, working family man and student) that he provides. He claims authority for those black brothers who cannot speak, silenced by being confined or killed by the state. His authority is also his inheritance, carrying forward his ancestral line of Black Panthers and gang overseers who stood against injustice. In his rearview is Malcolm X, in one of the few references to historical black thought. His blame also shifts; now, he divides his scorn of corrupt officers with those in the community who would remain passive, preferring to commit crimes than fight oppression. Thus, in contrast to before, he slides into a more systemic view before coming back to the 24/7 idea – police can do what they do, he won't get in their way, but he's in the hood so he's going to work to make it safe. Here we also observe his recognition of the limits of his power; he seems to accept that police will come in to his

neighborhood. But if pushed too far, he will "lose myself behind standing against injustice" and can rely on some in his community to stand with him.

*M13: I been all through the city and I don't have no issue wherever I go.*

*C19: Exactly.*

*M13: Why? Because I know how to conduct myself and carry myself, you know what I'm saying, as the outstanding members and I don't got to concern myself with that. But like I said, as far as policing in Milwaukee you know what I'm saying and policing in general, I have no issue against just- you know- just police. Righteous police. But the corrupt ones? I'ma always stand against injustice. I was raised...I'm a son of a retired Black Panther, I'm the son of a retired Blackstone Ranger. I'm a retired Black Disciple myself. Any injustice, Im gonna stand against it. Period.*

*C19: Right.*

*M13: If I could lose myself behind standing against injustice, I'm gonna do that 'til the day I die. So I'ma be the...So I'ma be the voice and I'ma be the man who stands for those who want to keep...who can't communicate or who can't talk because they either in prison or they dead. I'm the voice, you know what I'm saying, that's alive and well and kicking, you know what I'm saying, and walking when I'm talking. I ain't just- I ain't one of those individuals that's behind closing doors um smoking, drinking, you know what I'm saying committing crimes. No. I don't commit crimes. I stopped committing crimes in '99.*

*C19: Right.*

*M13: I'm a upstanding- I pay taxes. I'm a college student, you know what I'm saying? I work, I take care of my family. So I got the right to stand against injustice. I got the right to say what I'm saying today, you know what I'm saying, let these powers that be know it ain't gonna happen. Its...The stuff that's been going on for all the years that it's been going on, this comes to an end right now. And it's by any means necessary, as Malcolm would say. They...they got two options: get right or get rolled on, period. That's all to it.*

*C19: [laughs]*

*M13: That's all to it. Ain't no in between. Ain't no- we not negotiation man. We done negotiating. We got too many of our kids dying, we got to many of innocent uh people dying, we got too many of our elders being disrespected. I ain't standing for it no more and I got people- I got people that's willing to stand with me and make sure it don't happen no more either.*

*C19: Right.*

*M13: So all I could say is, man, the police do what they can do, do whatever they need to do but in the meantime, between time- when they eight hours over with- I'm still here in the hood. I'm gonna make sure that the hood be safe as long as I'm in the hood. Period.*

*C19: There you go, there you go. Hey man, it's been a marvelous conversation man. But you know what, like I said, I'ma- I'm gonna end it with this man. Uh, I see me and you got the same view as far as the police go: you know, all the corrupt ones need to just get on and go on all up out of here. And like you said, they go and do they job for eight hours but we still there in the community. You know?*

The remainder of the conversation ricochets between individual agency and structural obstacles, optimism and peril. After realizing their common origins in the "Wild Hundreds," the Chicago man gives more insight into his perspective and personal story. Rescued from addiction through the abiding commitment of a mentor, he places faith in giving kids a better chance by mentoring them and shepherding them. Like the Milwaukee man, then, while disparaging behavior, he embraces a collective responsibility to help younger people through, to show them the way and provide love. He places faith in this guardianship strategy as one that will yield a detente: "Once that stop them police will stop." In his own life, he helped build a small center in southside Chicago. Returning to Beale Street in Memphis, he offers an explanation for what the Milwaukee man witnessed, which centers both senseless, reckless violence and inescapable poverty and the high walls thrown up to achieving economic security ("they don't give nobody a opportunity down there"), particularly those with felon convictions who desire work.

*C19: The Wild Hundreds: that was our area man. So, you know uh, it was crazy, corrupted. But like you said, we was knuckleheads back then. They had the right to come and get us.*

*M13: That's right.*

*C19: They had the right, ok? It's up to us to change man. And these little guys man, you know, I try to talk to little guys all the time. Like right now- in this center that I'm at right now- you know, I helped put this thing together, this center right here...And the man that runs this center, me and him been together for 18 years. Now, I'ma tell you just a little something about him. This man stuck by me through my drug addiction for 13 years. 13 years. Gave me a chance, gave me a change, gave me a chance. Didn't never falter. And so that's what we need to do for some of these kids out here: give 'em a chance man! Show 'em some love man! Take 'em out to dinner, do something with 'em man! … we love you man and we need y'all to straighten up!*

*M13: That's right.*

*C19: So go talk to some of your little guys that you hang out with and say hey, we need to stop this clique thing and straighten up. Once that stop them police will stop. They'll stop. They'll just go looking for the real niggas that's down here doing the wrong.*

*M13: That's it, that's it.*

*C19: Ok? The ones that's out here committing murders and breaking, and robbing, and stealing. They'll go after them instead of messing with these guys that's out here just walking the street.*

*M13: That's right.*

*C19: Now, as far as Memphis go, you said you was down on Beale Street. I want to help you out a little bit about them machine guns that they was carrying. It's necessary. They down there killing on Beale Street.*

*M13: Yes sir.*

*C19: They killing on Beale Street. They kill- they had a man about three months ago, uh, shot two people, and ran over the police, and killed them. Trying to get away. Ran the police over right on Beale Street. Now*

*you know can't no cop go up Beale Street. This man that drove down Beale Street killed the police. Think of how many other people he could've killed.*

*M13: Yeah, yeah.*

*C19: Those machine guns is necessary down there man. They down there shooting and killing. I don't even go on Beale Street. I'm scared to go on Beale Street cause these guys ain't go no sense of life man.*

*M13: Yeah I...I gathered that. I seen a guy get knocked out while I was down there.*

*C19: Yeah, they ain't go no sense of life. They- they don't care man! And you know what? I'ma tell you another thing about Memphis: it's so poor that that's why they do what they do.*

*M13: Yes sir.*

*C19: They don't- they don't give nobody an opportunity down there. Ok, they got all these temporary jobs going on and things but you know a lot of these got felonies. A lot of these guys got a lot of stuff hanging over they head. But a lot of 'em want to go work and change they life but they can't get in there because they got this background. Something need to change about that to get these guys to working so things could change.*

*M13: That's true, that's true.*

*C19: Ain't nothing gonna change until they start letting these guys get them some jobs. And work. And making them some honest money.*

*M13: That's right.*

*C19: You know? So the police is doing they job man, I ain't got nothing against the police. I really don't have nothing against the police. I like what they do. I walk through the- I walk around uh Memphis, Tennessee at my job. You know, they come in. Hey man, I appreciate you man. If I'm out just seeing one- hey man I appreciate you man, I shake their hand. Go into Walmart- they got 'em all over in Walmart- hey man I appreciate you man, keep on doing what you doing, stay safe, you know? I talk to 'em all just like yourself man.*

*M13: Right, that's right.*

*C19: You know? They got a job to do and people need to understand. They have a job to do and they job is hard to do. These days, at these times right now, it's a hard job for them.*

*M13: Yes sir.*

*C19: So people just need to just relax, and let them do they job, and hopefully they'll do it in the proper manner sooner. Instead of later.*

There are three centripetal ideas in this exchange. First, the conversation carries a strong current of individual responsibility. This rules-based perspective means that they take exception when either party - youth or police - don't follow rightful conduct. Neither puts forward a critique of the institution, its historical foundation, or its connection to an aggressive legal system heard in many other Milwaukee/Chicago exchanges. At the same time as moments of policing overreach are recognized, both return to an emphasis on the importance of knowing how to conduct oneself and the imperative of compliance (i.e. "give the police what they want when they ask for it"). Both men deride youthful offenders who "don't got no sense of life" but locate themselves as having past lives in the street. Individual conduct is of primary importance. As the Chicago man recounts his own socialization of his son after he began to have some run-ins with the law: "All you need to do is listen to me and you won't have no problems. Get your ass up, go to work, come home, eat you something, take a shower, go to bed, get up, and do it again."

Second, there is a high level of respect for and acceptance of the police role accompanied by a significant individual history of interaction with police beginning in early to late adolescence. They both regard police oversight as appropriate (in hindsight) during their own adolescence - "police had the right to come and get us." Police do not pose a major disruption to their current comings and goings, however, and each makes a point to say early on in the exchange that they "have no issue with police." The Chicago man mentions in passing that his two sons are justice involved - one is currently in jail for carrying a pistol and the other is on probation for guns. A considerable faith in

police (both say they have confidence on the survey, an outlier in Milwaukee/Chicago conversations) is paired with statements about admiration for the police and showing their gratitude by shaking hands with police.

However, these two themes are situated in complexity. This conversation features the capacity to carry both regard and understanding of police alongside a biting critique of "unrighteous police." Statements in support of police suddenly turn critical and anger about police actions, corruption, and excessive response comes to the fore more than a few times. And while they miss no opportunity to wag their fingers at youthful "knuckleheads," they are pained by the social and economic death of their brothers who are locked up or are saddled with records and preach that they need "love" and mentorship. A focus on individual conduct sits comfortably alongside activism against police disrespect and killing of innocent youth, and these both are located amidst a recognition of state failure to provide a way out of grinding poverty.

Third, a discursive argument about collective authority of the neighborhood is asserted early on and defended: "Y'all can't police our city for us. I said it's up to us to police our own city." What distinguishes this conversation from many others that also argue for collective agency is that the collective autonomy stance here *is not connected to a need to build a separate base of power in order to strengthen the community against police*. Neither is it based in an argument that we should be policing ourselves because of special communal knowledge as seen elsewhere (i.e. we have greater understanding of either the struggle or "what's going on with Tyrone and Tasha" as in the conversation just prior to this one). Rather, the collective responsibility to police is squarely connected to the immediate goal of community safety; and its rationale is sheer presence in the community ("I'm gonna make sure that the hood be safe as long as I'm in the hood.") The idea that the community is really the central authority in crime prevention, control, and policing is also strongly attached to individual accountability, being righteous, and collective responsibility: "it's up to us to change." Thus, despite

strongly individualistic orientations in this conversation compared to the others we've seen, this pair arrives at a similar route that prioritizes their community's agency and authority to govern.

Another important difference in the way this conversation arrives at community autonomy and self-determination is that the role of the community is prioritized *without* limiting the police role or envisioning an alternative to police altogether. Indeed, it is because the police role is limited for ensuring safety that community agency and authority is upheld; in a striking moment, one of the men says, "Because when it's all said and done, they go home after eight hours and do whatever they do. But I'm here 24/7. So it's- I should be the police of my city, not the police." At no point do we witness ideas that animated other conversations prioritizing a disavowal of police – "stop believing in their paperwork" or "stop giving them permission to come in" - even in the highest pitched moments of negative police appraisal. The turn to community is not a turn away from police.

As a result of its individualistic orientation, the communal responsibility discourse we witness here is less concerned with solidarity and unity; we see fewer calls for building together and no proclamations to "control our narratives" or "harvest our own" or "invest" in our own businesses. Comparatively less attention is paid to how police see them or position them in negative ways or the institution's historical legacy and foundations in slavery. Thus this community responsibility discourse is not nested within a broader discussion of asymmetries of power or the broader role of the law as fostering police abuse as happened in other exchanges. And yet this exchange also illustrates that community control and authority to police one's neighborhood travels the gamut of conversation narratives and is not reducible to a particular attitude. It is an orientation that encompasses many different attributions, attitudes, and perspectives of police.

**Conclusion**

Do interactions with the carceral state produce apolitical subjects? Certainly, existing research has documented important ways in which involuntary encounters with the punitive face of

government cause decreased trust in government and voter turnout. Yet the findings here also reveal that negative experiences with the criminal justice system can also be generative of civic thought.

The analyses of Portals conversations locate a dynamic in which institutional withdrawal responses are accompanied by a political stance and civic discourse concerned with liberation. Active detachment from the state (and occasionally seeking to isolate oneself from one another) *and* affirmations of attachment to the group go hand in hand – a set that together conveys a consistent political response of collective autonomy. Within this broader political stance, Portals conversations and participants differ on much: on the precise role of police and of themselves, on the necessity of a particular course of action, on the precise vehicles to realize community power, on how they imagine "coming together." This orientation of collective autonomy, then, crosses various boundaries – city, community, individual identity – and those more and less skeptical of the state. Collective autonomy has instantiations in individualistic as well as more radical orientations. And we locate it in the largest archive of police narratives to date, dialogues that themselves move across large ideas of how police function to specific memories, move across history and place and generation, within individual experience but also beyond –as witnesses to Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Samuel Dubose.

There is an efflorescence of research on the criminal justice system in political science, and rightly so, as for many individuals the punitive arm of the state is the most visible and most influential face of government. As scholarship in this area continues to proliferate, our findings provide an important caution to political scientists: those who are rightly concerned by the predatory, authoritarian actions of government in a nominally democratic society should also remember that the human beings it interacts with are not merely victims but also political agents.

[i] For instance, institutional accounts have suggested that individuals and organizations often do mobilize but are burdened by the limited jurisdiction of their cities (Miller 2008) and the resource scarcity of grassroots organizations, particularly those which are minority-run (Jones 2018, Owens and Walker 2018). Behavioral accounts, including Hannah Walker's (forthcoming) work on proximal contact suggests that individuals with incarcerated family members, when motivated by a sense of injustice, will engage in political mobilization. We add to this growing body of literature a closer examination of civic behaviors and ideals that surpass the scope of many survey measures.

[ii] Police patrolling has long raised alarms among legal theorists and sociologists concerned with "legal cynicism," the belief that legal institutions are arbitrary, unjust, and unfair. In places where policing is concentrated, adversarial, or violent, residents are much more reticent to call police for help, to report crimes, or to report neighborhood problems (Desmond, Papachristos and Kirk 2016). Some may not just close themselves off to cooperation with police and legal authorities, but to local institutions more broadly. Sociologists have termed this "system avoidance," whereby custodial populations engage in a wider evasion of medical, labor market, and educational institutions (Brayne 2014; Goffman 2009) or emergency rooms when police are present (Lara-Millan 2014). New York City residents who lived in areas of aggressive stop and frisk tactics were less willing to invite government attention even when in need (Lerman and Weaver 2014a). One way to register one's opposition to or unwillingness to risk state mistreatment is to forgo it altogether.

[iii] We use Dedoose, a qualitative coding software, to code conversation excerpts.

[iv] We describe our process of coding and categorizing responses in greater detail in the Appendix.

[v] Despite our effort to select for diversity, there are two forms of homogeneity across conversations. All of these conversations are selected from the Milwaukee and Chicago sites. To overcome this limitation, we excerpt dialogues from our Baltimore, Los Angeles, and Newark sites to demonstrate

the prevalence of collective autonomy for Black participants across Portals locations. The second limitation is that these dialogues skew toward young adult and middle-aged participants, so our analysis does not fully capture a large demographic of Black men and women between the ages of 18-24. Again, we try to overcome this bias through excerpts when introducing collective autonomy.

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# Appendix: Withdrawing or Drawing In?

## A. A Portal (from the inside and outside):

*A note on site selection:* The places were selected largely because of convenience and connections – the existence of community partners who would help run the Portal and share space. We often partnered with local nonprofit organizations that have an artistic and justice-oriented mission; they typically provide the Portal a physical space in a central location with high foot-traffic as well as an enduring connection to the community. They were deeply involved in the programming beyond our criminal justice dialogues.

Table 1: Conversation Pairings by City

| city_a | city_b | count |
|---|---|---|
| Baltimore | LA | 66 |
| Chicago | Baltimore | 46 |
| LA | Baltimore | 161 |
| LA | Chicago | 33 |
| Milwaukee | Baltimore | 51 |
| Milwaukee | Chicago | 112 |
| Milwaukee | LA | 29 |

*Note:*
Conversations with missing pairing data ommitted

## B. Participant Characteristics

The Portals project collected approximately 866 dialogues in total. However, for this paper we prioritize the 233 conversations between 466 Black participants, regardless of city. The reason we do so is to identify knowledge in the Black counterpublic and among similar, nonrandom alters who can be assumed to be knowledgeable about the subject (Harris-Lacewell 2004; Small 2013). These sites capture different neighborhood contexts, political geographies, and policing regimes. To varying degrees, these neighborhoods experience high rates of adverse police encounters, on timing and prevalence of police stops. The participant data displayed in the Appendix represents the 796 participants who identify as Black/African-American in their survey.

### Figure 1

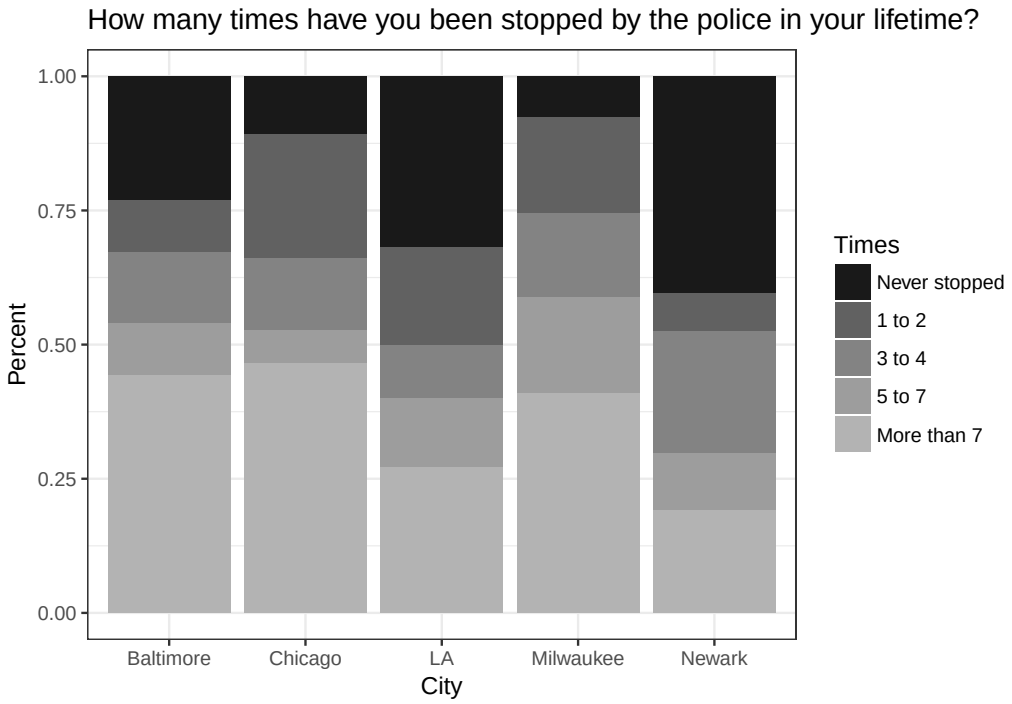


**Figure 2**

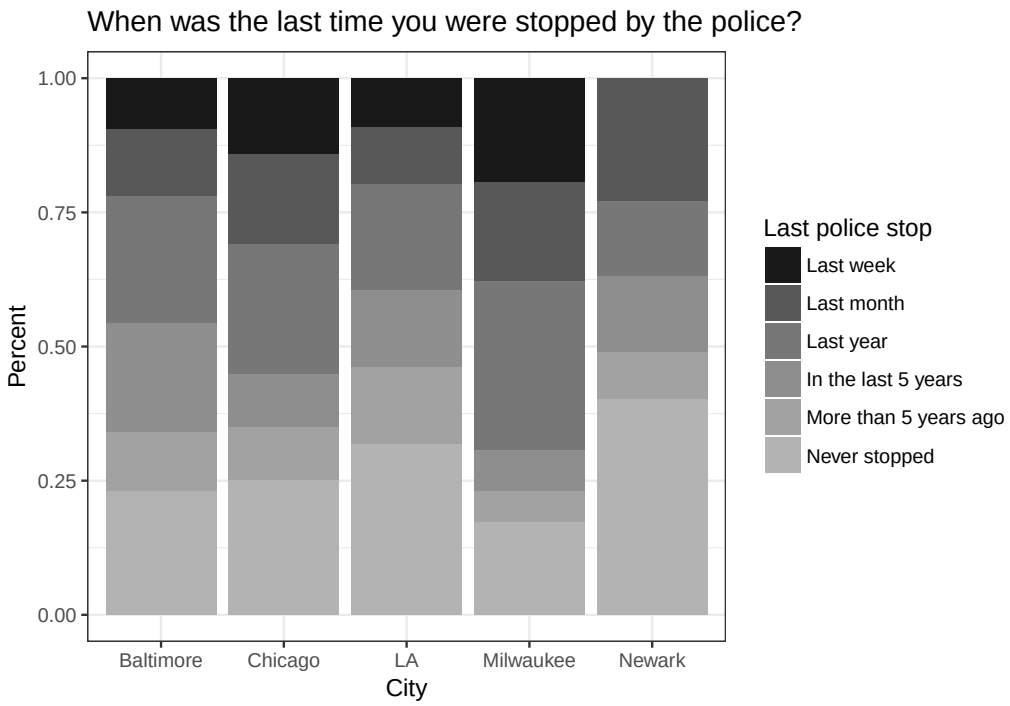



**Figure 3**

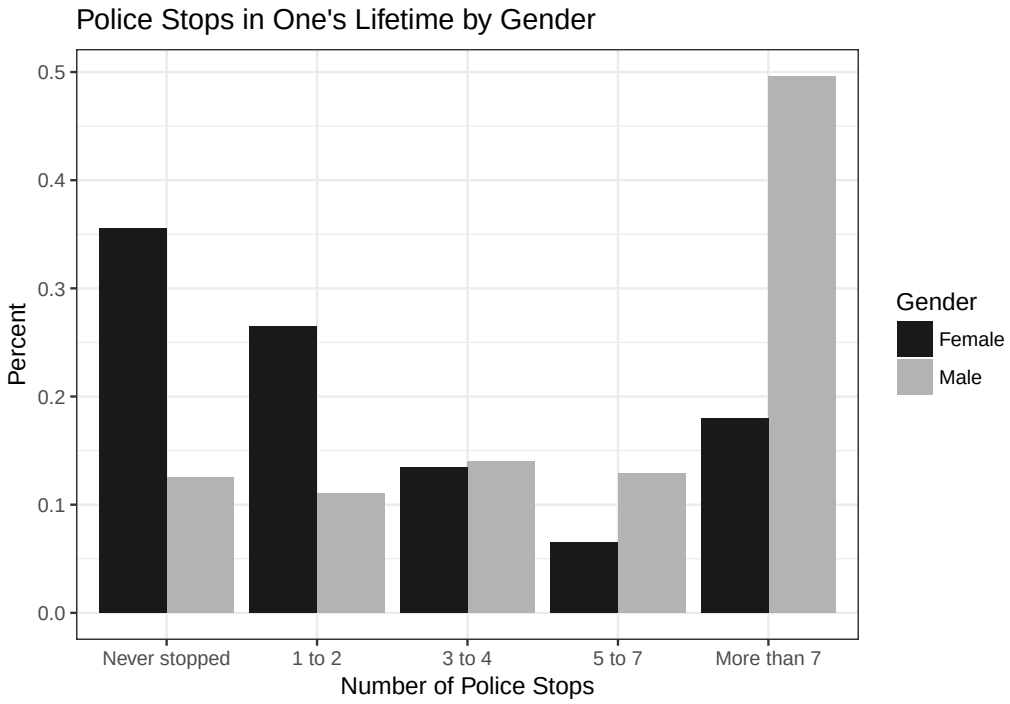


**Figure 4**

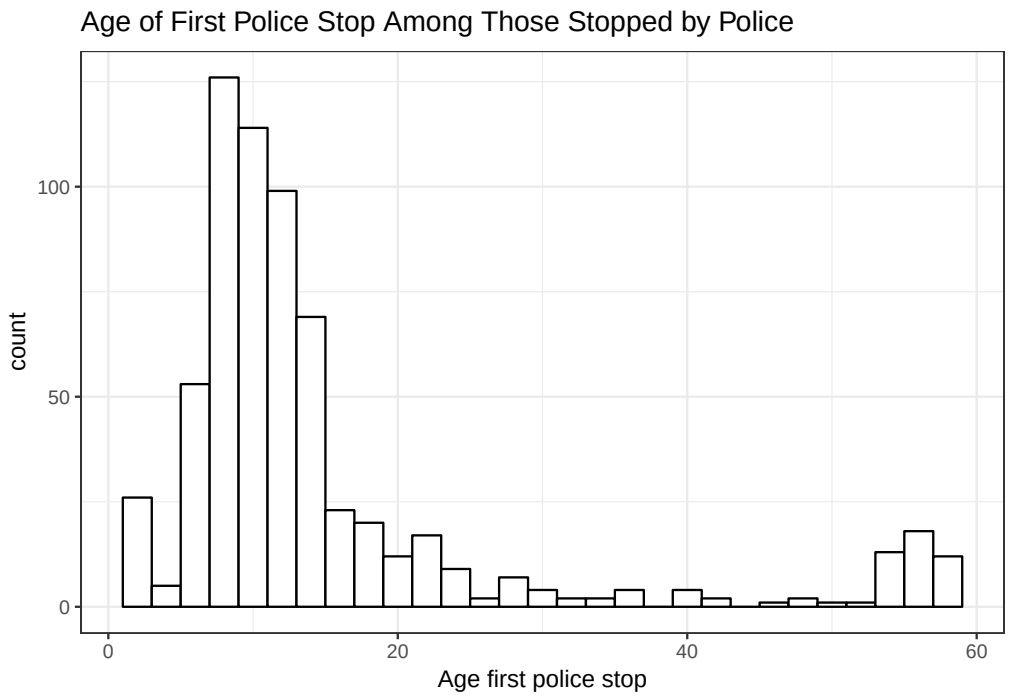



**Figure 5**

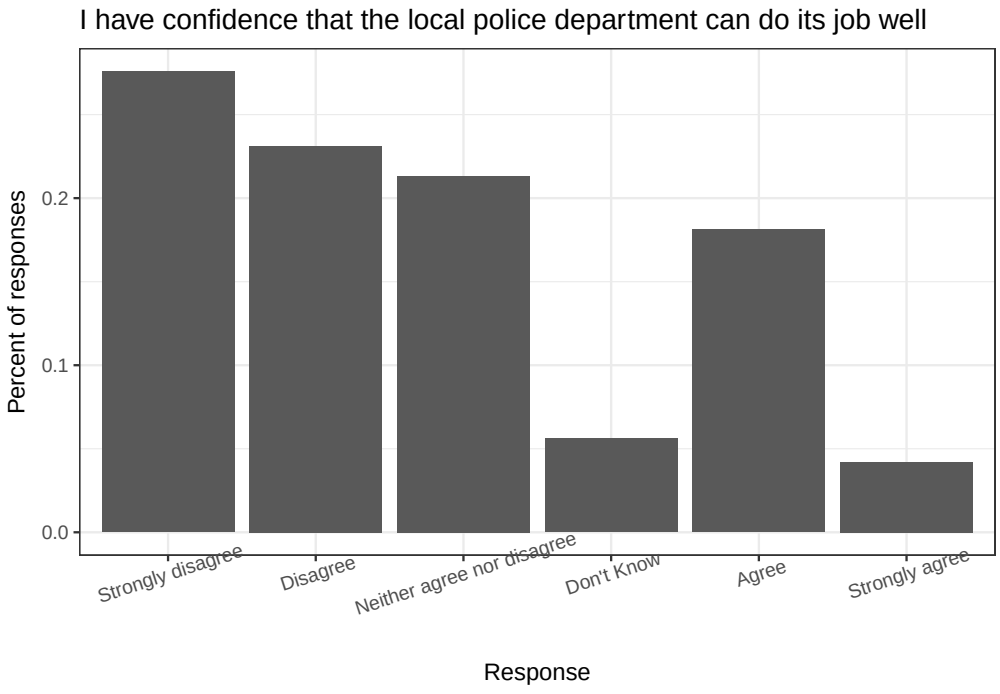
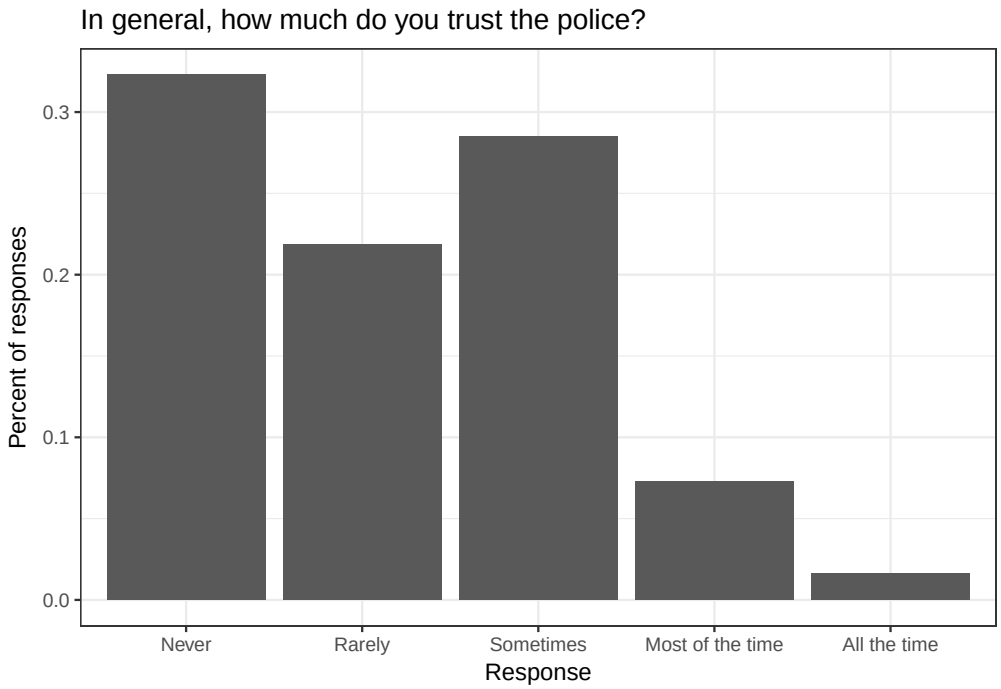


**Figure 6**




# C. Extended Discussion on Conversation Analysis

Central to understanding collective autonomy is interpreting not only what participants do in response to police encounters, but also what they aspire to do. Therefore, we distinguish between **agentic** and **suggestive** responses, placing coded responses into one or another. An agentic response describes ways in which participants are currently working to cope with experiences with the criminal justice system in general and the police in particular. Agentic responses take two forms –engagement, which looks like traditional measures of civic engagement (e.g. voting, protest, community service, sustained activism), and adaptation, where participants change their behavior to increase their level of power, safety, or dignity. Adaptations comprise actions such as staying indoors or out of groups, modifying dress or self-presentation, changing routes and routines, engaging with the police in a particular way, or calling neighbors or family members instead of police. These responses are more reflective of what Robin DG Kelley calls "the politics from below," or what Jim Scott terms the "weapons of the weak" (Kelley 1994; Scott 1990). A suggestive response is a proposal for what might change the status quo without taking any particular action. Suggestive responses may include proposals for increasing police efficacy or legitimacy (e.g. better training, accountability, descriptive representation) or for addressing the underlying conditions of violence, including poverty and education reforms. Suggestive responses may seem more amorphous, aspirational, and affective. Participants may express an urgent desire to "come together," "to know our history," to rebuild from the ground up or "police ourselves". We find the latter form of responses to be the most prevalent across the dialogues.