ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE MATRIX OF THE AMERICAN POLICE STATE: DOMINATION, FRAGMENTATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

Robyn T. Moore, Doctor of Philosophy, 2026

Dissertation directed by: Professor, Dr. Rashawn Ray, Department of Sociology

Why does police violence persist despite widespread public recognition of harm and repeated calls for reform? This dissertation argues that the persistence of police violence is not simply the result of failed policy or individual misconduct. Instead, it reflects a broader system of power that operates across multiple, connected domains. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination, this project shows how policing is produced, enforced, justified, and experienced through structural arrangements, institutional practices, public narratives, and everyday interactions. The dissertation makes three central contributions. First, it offers a new framework for understanding policing as a multi-domain system of power rather than a set of isolated problems. Second, it demonstrates how fragmentation in public discourse, especially around terms like reform and accountability, prevents meaningful collective action even when there appears to be widespread agreement. Third, it shows how policing is experienced differently across social positions, producing patterned forms of harm, legitimacy, and emotional response that help sustain the system over time. The chapters build this argument step by step. Chapter 1 examines the structural domain, showing how American federalism and legal design distribute authority while diffusing accountability, creating durable conditions for police power. Chapter 2 focuses on the disciplinary domain through a comparative analysis of two police departments,

demonstrating how organizational practices protect police authority even under reform and oversight. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological approach, using in-depth interviews to access how policing is understood and experienced across different groups. Chapter 4 analyzes the hegemonic domain, showing how shared language masks deep disagreement and produces a fragmented understanding of reform. Chapter 5 turns to the interpersonal domain, examining how policing is lived through fear, grief, defensiveness, and moral injury. Chapter 6 brings these domains together to show how they operate as an integrated system, explaining why reform efforts are often absorbed and why more fundamental change remains difficult. By shifting the focus from isolated failures to the full system that produces them, this dissertation provides a clearer explanation for the persistence of police violence and offers a framework for understanding the limits of reform.

THE MATRIX OF THE AMERICAN POLICE STATE:

DOMINATION, FRAGMENTATION AND DEHUMANIZATION

by

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A DEDICATION TO RADICAL LOVE

I dedicate this dissertation to my late grandmother, Margaret A. Moore, who was my sunshine during every storm. She devoted her life to the service of others and modeled a love rooted in compassion, integrity, and community that I try to carry on in my own life and work. Throughout my life, she was a steady source of wisdom, support, and unconditional love. We didn't always agree on everything but she taught me the importance of mutual respect, reflexivity and critical thinking. She forged her own path in life, often in ways that did not align with others' expectations, and taught me to make choices for myself with confidence and conviction.

My Gram shaped my understanding of love through the way she lived. She moved through the world without judgment, gave generously, and believed that those most in need were most deserving of care. She respected difference, practiced empathy, and expressed unconditional support as grace through her care for others and her commitment to community. From her, I learned that community is built not through agreement, but through relational commitment and a shared respect for others. She approached charity as a reflection of collective strength, not as an act of pity or judgment. She taught me to choose kindness over ego, often reminding me, "When given the choice between being right and being kind, always choose to be kind." She lived this principle, extending compassion to everyone she knew; even in the face of difficulty.

Her example became a lasting source of strength and grounding in my life. She taught me to recognize beauty in the world and to meet failure with grace, understanding it as part of growth. She also taught me the importance of storytelling. In long conversations, she shared her experiences of a changing world and her own evolution within it, preserving a kind of knowledge that is so easily forgotten. *Her quiet strength never wavered in its commitment to care, dignity, and community.*

I am deeply grateful to have been shaped by her presence. Without her love and guidance, this work would not have been possible. In her memory, I strive to carry these values forward and to remain grounded in love, dignity, and empathy.

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my journey. I am particularly grateful to my cat colony community, which I visit regularly as a source of hope, comfort and inspiration.

REFLEXIVITY

A Note on Critical Praxis and Positionality

By critical praxis, I refer to the entanglement of theory, experience, and action—a commitment to interrogating structures of power not only intellectually but through ethically grounded resistance and community solidarity. In the spirit of Paulo Freire's (CITE) belief that liberation is forged through action and reflection, and bell hooks' (CITE) vision of love as a political ethic, I approach critical praxis as an embodied method of resistance, care, and co-struggle. I acknowledge the tensions of practicing critical praxis from within academia—a space that often rewards abstraction over accountability—and remain committed to resisting its co-optive logics. At the time of writing, I am grappling with how to give voice to the grief and outrage that accompanies state-sanctioned violence and the collective suffering produced by hyper-individualism and the brutal machinery of late-stage capitalism. Just today, ICE raids were carried out in my Philadelphia neighborhood. The streets, still littered with garbage from the crushed DC33 sanitation workers' strike, reflect the disdain of a government more concerned with political optics than human dignity. Mayor Cherelle Parker, invoking the law and leveraging the threat of starvation, repressed the strike through injunctions while casting herself as the victim of the working class struggling to feed their families. Driving through the so-called "Parker Piles," en route to the cat sanctuary where I seek temporary peace, I witnessed the kind of communal disintegration that so often accompanies state violence. I saw something traumatic unfold as neighbors walked by with their dogs, eyes fixed to their phones. I, too, remained passive, trapped in a silence that mirrors the national mood: a silence forged by despair, fragmentation, and the slow erosion of hope.

Through mutual aid organizing, public scholarship, and facilitating cross-stakeholder dialogues, I attempt to enact critical praxis; not only by naming injustice but by disrupting its reproduction through shared labor and relational accountability. This dissertation is born from a yearning for collective resistance in a time defined by division. Despite my education and sociological training, I feel the loneliness of looking for a community that seems more myth than memory. People are not only suffering, they are isolated in their pain, and our cultural frameworks encourage that isolation. Validation, resentment, and performative rage substitute for genuine connection. The stakes of our disconnection are existential. In a world where empathy, respect, and accountability are increasingly rare, people scream into the void, pleading for recognition—yet fail to hear one another. Each interprets the cries of others as a distorted echo of their own. The result is not solidarity but cacophony, not understanding but alienation. Our culture promotes individual exceptionalism ("be the change," "speak your truth," "you can do it") but these platitudes are not counter-hegemonic. They ensure we remain divided, overworked, and isolated. Even those calling for justice are often seduced by the structures they oppose, as competition and ego eclipse empathy and relationality.

As a sociologist, I work to uncover the structures that shape these conditions. Using Gramscian critique of hegemony, the Matrix of Domination, and Critical Race Theory, I interrogate the ideological terrain where culture, policy, and affect intersect. My analysis reveals that people across the political spectrum are caught in hegemonic loops: demanding change while reproducing the very systems they seek to dismantle. The hegemonic domain is where agency is curtailed. Here, individuals across stakeholder categories (e.g., police, policymakers, organizers) may all invoke terms like "accountability" or "empathy," yet mean radically different

things. What emerges is not consensus but fragmentation: a fractured landscape where shared vocabulary obscures deep divides.

This dissertation explores how state violence, narrative control, and hegemonic discourse intersect to prevent reform. Drawing from interviews, I examine how stakeholders—across political and institutional lines—invoke shared terms (e.g., "accountability," "respect," "community") yet remain ideologically opposed. These contradictions reflect deeper struggles over meaning, power, and legitimacy. The first section outlines how the legal and discursive arms of the state sustain police impunity. The second presents stakeholder narratives, focusing on where they converge and diverge around key values like empathy and accountability. I argue these narratives are shaped not solely by position or identity but by hegemonic pressures that condition thought, feeling, and language. The hegemonic domain, I contend, disciplines both speech and silence. It teaches us to center personal harm over collective survival. In doing so, it disables our ability to unify, to trust, and to build the coalitions necessary for structural transformation and resistance against authoritarianism. If this work moves you, it is not a call to agreement but to engagement, to resist domination wherever it manifests, beginning with ourselves.

Positionality Statement

I do not center myself to suggest that my suffering is unique, but to clarify the lens through which I write. I am racialized as white, cisgender, and heterosexual. I was raised in a working-class family and shaped by both wage labor and institutional education. My ancestors assimilated into whiteness under threat of exclusion and violence, an inheritance I seek neither to disavow nor exceptionalize. My epistemology is rooted not in individual insight but in

community, and I speak from within a collective experience of social suffering. I draw from traditions of feminist and decolonial thought that reject the myth of neutrality, reminding us that all knowledge is situated and relational. I hold that all humans deserve dignity. I reject binary frameworks of good and evil in favor of structural critiques that illuminate how systems render some lives expendable and others exceptional. In a world where identity is often commodified, I work to refocus attention on collective accountability and community resilience. I remain aware of the contradictions that come with writing from within academia; an institution that can both enable and constrain critical praxis. I strive to resist its tendencies toward abstraction, competition, and detachment. As part of this work, I commit to naming the privileges I carry, the blind spots I inhabit, and the power dynamics I cannot always see.

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INTRODUCTION:

THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION AND POLICE VIOLENCE

Understanding the Problem of American Police Violence

In 2020, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, video footage of a police killing circulated rapidly across the globe. George Floyd, a 46-year-old Black man, was detained by Minneapolis police on suspicion of using a counterfeit twenty-dollar bill. After being handcuffed and pinned to the ground, Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes as he pleaded for air and called out for his mother. Other officers present failed to intervene or render medical aid, ultimately leading to his slow death from suffocation. In medical and legal terms, Floyd died from restraint-related asphyxia, as sustained pressure on his neck and upper back restricted breathing and precipitated cardiopulmonary arrest. The egregious nature of this conduct by law enforcement was not new, nor the technology used to capture the murder. However, the circumstances of the Covid-19 lockdown allowed for sustained coverage, forcing many Americans to reckon with the reality of police violence.

Floyd's murder catalyzed what many scholars describe as the largest mass mobilization in U.S. history (Carney & Kelekay, 2022; Petitjean & Talpin, 2022; Scott et. al 2022; Hatfield 2023; Simonson et al., 2024). An estimated 26 million people participated in protest events nationwide, exceeding participation in both the Civil Rights Movement and the anti-Vietnam War movement (Buchanan, Bui, and Patel 2020). Demonstrations occurred in all fifty states and across the world, with broad participation across age, race, gender, and class. Public opinion data reflected a unique moment of consensus across political ideology. In 2022, Gallup reported that 89 percent

of respondents supported police reform, with half calling for major institutional changes (Brenan 2022). Yet the years that followed revealed a striking contradiction.

In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, states and localities raced to introduce police reform legislation. However, police budgets increased, and fatal encounters with police rose, with more civilians killed by police in 2024 than in any year of the previous decade (Phelps et al. 2021; Lally 2022 ; Fegley and Murtazashvili 2023; Mapping Police Violence 2024). During the same period, public support for police rebounded and strengthened, particularly in relation to local police departments (Gallup 2024). A recent study found similar trends, with increased support for police funding tied to perceptions of rising violent crime (Pew Research Center 2025). National crime statistics show that many categories of crime declined following the pandemic-era spike (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2025). This pattern reflects what scholars describe as the reform paradox of American policing: periods of crisis and public outrage often produce waves of reform that expand rather than constrain the institutional capacity of law enforcement. As Hinton (2016), Soss and Weaver (2017), and Vitale (2017) argue, reform efforts frequently operate through the same carceral and bureaucratic infrastructures that produced the problem, allowing policing institutions to absorb critique while preserving their underlying power.

This dissertation examines the contradiction between widespread consensus calling for substantial reform and the persistence and intensification of police violence. Rather than treating this outcome as a failure of implementation or political will, this project approaches reform failure as a predictable consequence of institutional designs that insulate police power from meaningful constraint (Williams 2011; Garland 2023; Lally 2022).

Power, Legitimacy and Domination

Understanding police violence requires clarifying several foundational concepts that structure the analysis that follows: power, legitimacy, and domination. In sociological terms, power refers to the capacity of actors or institutions to shape the behavior, opportunities, or life chances of others, even in the face of resistance (Weber 1978; Lukes 2005). Power operates not only through direct coercion but also through institutional arrangements, knowledge production, and the shaping of norms that define what actions appear reasonable or necessary.

Legitimacy refers to the belief that authority is rightful and should be obeyed (Weber 1978). Institutions maintain legitimacy when their actions are perceived as appropriate, lawful, or morally justified, even when those actions involve coercion. In the context of policing, legitimacy is produced through legal frameworks, professional narratives, and public discourse that present police authority as necessary for maintaining order and safety.

Domination describes a more durable form of power in which relations of authority become stabilized and normalized over time. Domination occurs when power is embedded in institutional structures and social hierarchies such that compliance appears routine, natural, or inevitable (Weber 1978; Collins 2000). Patricia Hill Collins' concept of the Matrix of Domination is particularly useful for understanding how these dynamics operate across multiple domains simultaneously. Structural arrangements, disciplinary practices, hegemonic narratives, and interpersonal interactions interact to produce and reproduce hierarchical relations of power.

These distinctions are important for analytically separating several related but distinct concepts central to this dissertation: policing, police power, and police violence. Policing refers broadly to the set of institutional practices, organizational structures, and legal authorities tasked with regulating social order. It includes the activities of police departments as well as the broader

governance frameworks through which states monitor, manage, and respond to perceived disorder. Police power, by contrast, refers to the authority granted to the state to regulate behavior in the name of public safety, health, and welfare. Historically rooted in legal doctrines of state sovereignty, police power encompasses a wide range of regulatory capacities beyond law enforcement alone. Within modern policing institutions, this authority is operationalized through discretion, surveillance, investigation, and enforcement practices that shape everyday encounters between the state and the public. Police violence represents one possible manifestation of police power. It refers specifically to the use of coercive force by law enforcement that results in physical harm, death, or the credible threat of such outcomes. While violence is often framed as an exceptional breakdown of policing norms, this project treats it as an outcome produced within broader institutional arrangements that authorize and regulate the use of force. Distinguishing these concepts allows the dissertation to examine police violence not simply as isolated misconduct, but as a phenomenon embedded within the larger structures through which police power is organized, legitimized, and experienced.

Limitations of Existing Explanations of Police Violence

Contemporary policing research has made substantial contributions to understanding operational effectiveness(cite), officer behavior(cite), and programmatic reform(cite). However, this literature remains disproportionately oriented toward technocratic evaluation and crime-control outcomes, often at the expense of examining how policing is experienced, interpreted, and embodied by the communities most subject to police power. Evidence-based policing, for example, emphasizes rigorous empirical testing, targeting, and performance metrics (Sherman 2013), but largely brackets questions of meaning, legitimacy, and harm. As a result, policing is

evaluated primarily through administrative indicators of success rather than through public perceptions or its broader social, emotional, and health consequences. Recent scholarship shows that such technocratic approaches do not merely overlook legitimacy but actively reproduce it by normalizing notions of danger, professional expertise, and managed public consent (Sierra-Arévalo 2021; Cheng 2024). For example, policing institutions often integrate mechanisms of community consultation that signal responsiveness while ultimately reinforcing existing enforcement practices (Cheng 2024). These forms of managed participation help produce legitimacy by incorporating public input without fundamentally altering the institutional logic of policing. Recent work further suggests that what appear as opposing theoretical positions often operate as co-constitutive "performative attitudes," generating shared analytic terrain even through disagreement (Diaz 2024).

This narrow analytic focus obscures the cumulative effects of police contact on widely interpreted measures of community well-being, particularly for marginalized populations. A growing body of public health and trauma-focused research demonstrates that exposure to policing and police violence is associated with adverse mental and physical health outcomes, including increased anxiety, depression, stress-related illness, and community-level trauma, especially among Black youth and residents of heavily policed neighborhoods (Jindal et al. 2022; Oppenheim et al. 2024). For example, ethnographic research shows how repeated police encounters structure everyday behavior, shaping how young people navigate schools, public space, and relationships with authority (Rios 2011). Yet these insights remain largely peripheral to mainstream policing scholarship. Much criminological research continues to evaluate policing primarily through crime-control outcomes, focusing on measures such as crime rates, arrests, clearance rates, and programmatic efficiency rather than broader social consequences (Sherman

2013; Dalton 2021). While some sociological scholarship has examined the lived experience of policing, particularly in studies of youth criminalization and the school-to-prison pipeline, these perspectives are rarely integrated into dominant theories of police practice, reform, or legitimacy. The persistence of this separation reinforces an artificial boundary between crime control and community health, limiting our understanding of policing as a governing institution that structures everyday life, risk, and vulnerability far beyond discrete encounters with law enforcement.

Research on police culture similarly offers valuable but partial accounts of police behavior. Studies of occupational socialization demonstrate how norms, training, and peer dynamics shape officers' discretionary decision-making and use of force (Paoline 2004; Ingram, Terrill, and Paoline 2018). Yet this body of work often treats culture primarily as an internal occupational phenomenon and under-theorizes how these shared beliefs and practices operate as a broader hegemonic force that stabilizes police authority even amid public contestation. Organizational technologies of surveillance, data collection, and risk management, including predictive analytics, performance metrics, body cameras, and digital databases, further reinforce these dynamics by translating discretionary judgments into forms that appear technical, neutral, and objective. In doing so, they render police authority legible as necessary and evidence-driven while obscuring the social relations and inequalities that structure policing outcomes (Brayne 2020; Sierra-Arévalo 2021). As a result, this literature rarely connects the internal worldviews of officers to the lived experiences of those most subject to policing, particularly communities exposed to chronic surveillance, coercion, and institutional distrust.

Studies of police discretion further illustrate these limitations. While scholars have long acknowledged the difficulty of constraining discretionary power (Mastrofski 2004), much of this

work treats discretion primarily as a managerial or legal problem rather than as a site of moral reasoning, racialized threat perception, and emotional alignment. Social psychological research demonstrates that beliefs about Black physicality, pain tolerance, and dangerousness shape judgments about appropriate force, linking individual cognition to broader organizational and structural dynamics (Hoffman and Trawalter 2014; Gilbert and Ray 2016). Yet these insights remain largely disconnected from dominant theories of police governance and reform.

Existing scholarship thus reveals a persistent and consequential divide between how policing is studied and how it is lived. By privileging institutional perspectives and measurable outcomes, the dominant literature sidelines the affective, interpretive, and relational dimensions through which police power is legitimized or resisted. What remains missing is an integrative framework capable of linking structural arrangements, organizational practices, hegemonic narratives, and interpersonal experience. Addressing this gap requires shifting focus from what policing does to how it is produced, justified, and experienced across social positions (Collins 2000). This dissertation advances such an approach by situating policing within what Patricia Hill Collins terms the Matrix of Domination and conceptualizing police power as a multi-domain system operating simultaneously across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains.

The Matrix of Domination

Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination offers a relational framework for understanding how power and inequality are produced and sustained through mutually reinforcing domains rather than through a single institution or actor. The Matrix conceptualizes power as operating simultaneously across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal

domains that together produce and reproduce social hierarchy. Power does not simply reside within institutions, nor are institutions neutral expressions of authority. Rather, power is produced, enforced, justified, and experienced across these domains at once. In what follows, I briefly introduce Collins' framework and then outline how it is applied throughout this dissertation to analyze the persistence of police violence in the United States.

First, the **structural domain** refers to the broad social systems that organize everyday life, including legal regimes, state institutions, housing markets, schools, and labor systems. This domain establishes the formal rules and institutional arrangements that distribute resources, protections, and opportunities unevenly across populations. Structural arrangements determine which groups are exposed to heightened surveillance, punishment, or deprivation and which are shielded from these risks. For example, laws governing housing, sentencing, or welfare eligibility shape where people can live, how they are punished, and what forms of assistance they can access long before any direct encounter with state authority occurs.

The **disciplinary domain** focuses on how these structural rules are administered through organizations and bureaucratic practice. Power in this domain operates through policies, procedures, professional standards, and enforcement mechanisms that regulate behavior and manage populations. Surveillance systems, performance metrics, disciplinary codes, and routine decision-making processes shape how institutions implement rules and allocate resources. Importantly, the disciplinary domain encompasses both differential treatment and differential outcomes that emerge through bureaucratic practice. Identical laws can produce sharply unequal results depending on how agencies monitor, enforce, and interpret them, often in ways that appear technical or neutral while systematically disadvantaging marginalized groups.

The **hegemonic domain** involves the ideas, narratives, and cultural beliefs that make

unequal systems appear normal, justified, or inevitable. Media coverage, political rhetoric, expert reports, and everyday language all contribute to shaping how social problems are defined and what responses appear legitimate. Within this domain, inequality is often explained through narratives of individual failure, cultural deficiency, or public necessity rather than structural design. These narratives influence what policies seem reasonable, which groups are seen as deserving of protection or control, and whose experiences are believed. At the same time, the hegemonic domain is also a site of contestation where counter-hegemonic knowledge and resistance emerge from marginalized communities (Collins 2021).

Finally, the **interpersonal domain** captures how power is experienced and enacted through everyday interactions between individuals. These encounters shape how people are treated, spoken to, trusted, feared, or dismissed in ordinary social situations. Power at this level influences emotions, expectations, and self-understandings, often reinforcing broader hierarchies in subtle but cumulative ways. These everyday experiences both reflect and reproduce the institutional arrangements and cultural narratives operating across the structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic domains.

Within the context of policing, the structural domain includes the legal doctrines, jurisdictional arrangements, and political institutions that authorize police power. The disciplinary domain encompasses the bureaucratic practices through which departments implement these authorities, including patrol deployment, data-driven policing, and internal disciplinary systems. The hegemonic domain involves narratives of crime, danger, and public safety that legitimize police authority. Finally, the interpersonal domain captures the lived experience of policing through everyday encounters between officers and civilians.

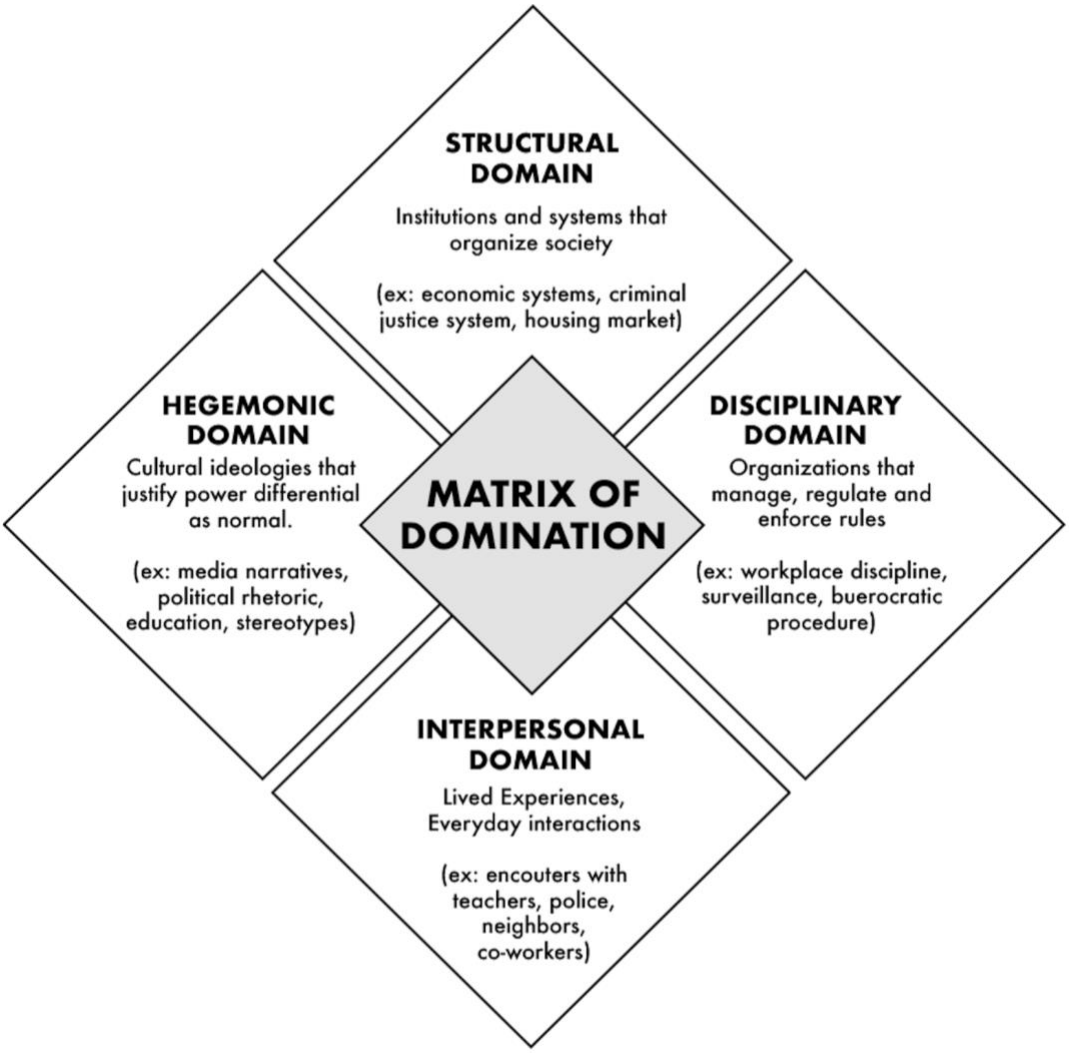


Figure 1. The Matrix of Domination (Collins 2000)

Applying the Matrix to American Policing

American policing is marked by a striking and unresolved contradiction. The murder of George Floyd in 2020 catalyzed what many scholars describe as the largest protest movement in U.S. history, with tens of millions of people demanding accountability and far-reaching reform (Sanchez 2023). Public opinion data in the immediate aftermath reflected this moment of consensus, with overwhelming majorities of Americans expressing support for significant

changes to policing (Gallup 2020, Gallup 2022). Yet in the years that followed, police violence intensified rather than receded despite an overall decline in violent crime (Mapping Police Violence 2025). Fatal encounters with police increased, law enforcement budgets grew, and public confidence in police institutions strengthened. The widespread mobilization and reformist sentiments coincided with worsening outcomes and renewed legitimacy revealing a deeper puzzle: **how does an institution facing unprecedented critique continue to expand its authority and public support?**

The Matrix of Domination offers a uniquely well-suited framework for addressing this puzzle because it conceptualizes power as operating across multiple, interlocking domains rather than residing in a single institution, policy, or set of actors. Unlike approaches that isolate police violence as a problem of individual misconduct, legal insufficiency, or cultural attitudes alone, the matrix foregrounds how formal structures, bureaucratic enforcement practices, legitimating narratives, and everyday interactions work together to stabilize power. This framework makes visible how reforms in one domain can be absorbed or neutralized by dynamics in others, helping explain why widespread demands for change coexist with intensified police violence and renewed institutional legitimacy. This dissertation applies the Matrix of Domination to American policing by organizing each chapter around one of its four interlocking domains, culminating in an integrated analysis of how police power is produced, protected, and experienced despite widespread calls for reform.

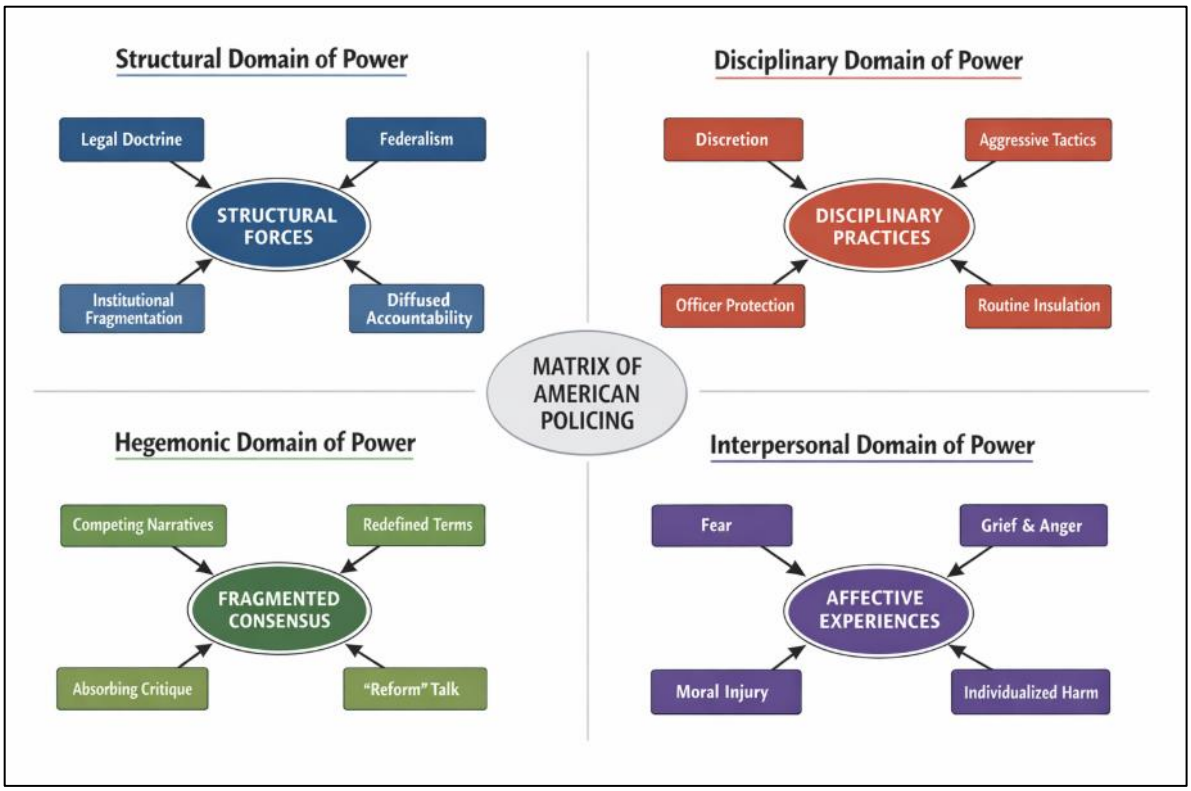


Figure 2. The Matrix of American Policing (Applying Collins)

Chapter 1 examines the structural domain, arguing that the central institution organizing inequality in the context of American police violence is the U.S. federalist legal system. This complex arrangement distributes authority across three federal branches as well as state and local governments, producing fragmented accountability and durable discretionary power. Tracing the historical evolution of this legal apparatus, from Indigenous removal and slave patrols to the emergence of professionalized police departments, this chapter demonstrates how policing developed as a mechanism for producing and reinforcing a racialized labor hierarchy. By situating police violence within this legal-historical framework, the chapter reveals the incentive structures that continue to organize police power across the other domains.

Chapter 2 focuses on the disciplinary domain, examining policing at the organizational level of law enforcement agencies. Because policing in the United States is highly decentralized,

individual departments develop distinct policies, practices, and occupational cultures, even while operating within shared legal constraints. Here, I compare two departments: Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland and the Detroit Police Department in Michigan. Doing so shows how police power is protected and insulated from accountability, even under conditions of federal oversight and large-scale reform. The comparison likewise demonstrates that disciplinary practices consistently reproduce inequality because they are shaped by structural incentives that prioritize the maintenance of a racialized labor hierarchy. In this sense, the disciplinary domain functions as the enforcement mechanism through which structural power is realized and calcified.

Chapter 3 marks a turn to on-the-ground perspectives. I first outline the methodological approach, centered on in-depth qualitative interviews analyzed through both narrative and affective lenses. These methods are designed to generate insight into the hegemonic and interpersonal domains, allowing the dissertation to examine how police power is justified, contested, and lived across different social positions.

Chapter 4 interrogates the hegemonic domain, which is particularly difficult to measure because it operates through diffuse cultural narratives, political rhetoric, media coverage, and taken-for-granted assumptions about policing and criminality. This chapter situates contemporary debates about police reform within a polarized political landscape shaped by divisive rhetoric, uneven news coverage, and cultural representations that normalize police authority. To empirically access this domain, the chapter analyzes interviews with three groups, law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders, who are engaged in police research, reform, or resistance across multiple U.S. cities. The analysis shows how proximity to different domains of power shapes beliefs about policing and produces a fractured

lexicon of reform. Shared terms such as “reform,” “accountability,” and “respect” carry fundamentally different meanings across groups, undermining consensus and obscuring conflicting goals. Through narrative analysis, the chapter demonstrates how hegemonic fragmentation destabilizes reform efforts even amid apparent agreement.

Chapter 5 centers the interpersonal domain through an affective analysis of lived experience. This chapter examines how dehumanization operates emotionally and relationally among individuals who have experienced police violence, worked within law enforcement, or attempted to reform policing through legislation. By foregrounding emotions such as fear, defensiveness, grief, frustration, and moral injury, the chapter shows how everyday encounters with policing shape identities, expectations, and relationships, reinforcing or challenging broader systems of domination.

Chapter 6 brings the full matrix together, synthesizing insights across all four domains to show how police power persists through their interaction rather than through failure in any single domain. The dissertation concludes with a call to action that emphasizes the necessity of multi-domain interventions. It argues that meaningful transformation requires confronting the structural foundations, disciplinary practices, hegemonic narratives, and interpersonal harms that collectively sustain police violence.

Taken together, this dissertation argues that American police violence cannot be understood as the result of policy failure, individual misconduct, or cultural misunderstanding alone. Instead, it reflects a durable configuration of power that is produced, enforced, legitimized, and experienced across multiple domains simultaneously. Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins’ Matrix of Domination, this project demonstrates how structural legal arrangements incentivize discretion and fragmentation, disciplinary practices reproduce racialized hierarchies

within police institutions, hegemonic narratives stabilize legitimacy even amid crisis, and interpersonal encounters generate profound emotional and material harm.

Viewed through this framework, policing is not merely an isolated institution but a critical node within the broader Matrix of Domination. By examining how policing operates across structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains, the study illuminates the mechanisms through which domination is reproduced more broadly within American democracy. The persistence of police violence in the face of mass protest and widespread calls for reform is therefore not paradoxical. It is predictable. Reform efforts that target only one domain leave the larger architecture of power intact. Understanding policing through the Matrix of Domination thus clarifies not only why police violence persists, but also how the broader matrix itself functions to absorb crisis while preserving hierarchical power.

CHAPTER 1:

THE PERSISTENCE OF POLICE POWER

The Structural Domain

The persistence of police violence in the United States despite unprecedented public demands for reform is not the result of isolated policy failure or individual misconduct. Nor can it be explained by any single domain of power acting alone. Rather, it reflects the interaction of structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal forces that collectively stabilize police authority even in moments of intense public contestation. To begin unraveling this dynamic, this chapter focuses on the structural foundations that organize police power in the United States.

Situated within the structural domain of Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination, this chapter argues that American federalism provides the legal and institutional conditions under which police power becomes durable, expandable, and resistant to democratic constraint—but not self-executing. Constitutional design embeds coercive authority at the state and local level while dispersing accountability across jurisdictions, creating a permissive architecture within which other domains of power operate. Tracing the historical convergence of federalism, racialized political economy, and the professionalization of policing, the chapter shows how structural arrangements enable disciplinary practices, legitimation narratives, and interpersonal harms to reproduce police violence over time. By examining federal, state, and local configurations of authority, this chapter establishes the groundwork for the subsequent analysis of how police power is enforced, justified, and experienced across the remaining domains of the matrix. The Structural Domain has consistently organized society to produce a racialized labor hierarchy, despite many attempts to transform. Moreover, after the Civil War, the Northern

economy was able to centralize enforcement of the racialized labor hierarchy to benefit its economic system, through the 13th and 14th Amendment.

UNDERSTANDING THE STRUCTURAL DOMAIN OF POLICE VIOLENCE

A growing body of sociological, legal, and critical scholarship challenges the view that police violence is best understood as the result of individual misconduct, organizational culture, or failed policy implementation. Instead, these literatures increasingly situate policing within broader structures of racial capitalism, legal governance, and state power. From this perspective, police violence functions less as a deviation from democratic order and more as a mechanism through which racialized inequality and economic stratification are managed and stabilized. Central to this interpretation is the institutional architecture of American federalism, a constitutional system that divides authority among federal, state, and local governments while granting substantial autonomy to local jurisdictions over policing. This fragmented governance structure distributes coercive authority widely while diffusing responsibility for its consequences.

Theories of racial capitalism further emphasize that policing cannot be disentangled from the economic and political systems it protects. Building on Robinson's (1983) analysis of racial capitalism and Du Bois's (1935) account of racialized labor control, scholarship shows that policing historically developed as a mechanism for regulating labor, disciplining marginalized populations, and protecting property relations rather than primarily resolving harm or promoting public safety (Gilmore 2007; Neocleous 2000; Go 2018). In this framework, racialized surveillance and violence are not anomalies but core instruments through which states manage populations rendered economically or politically precarious. Such perspectives help explain why

reform efforts that focus narrowly on training, oversight, or procedural adjustments often fail to produce meaningful change. These interventions leave intact the underlying political–economic conditions that position policing as a tool of population management rather than democratic protection.

Empirical research reinforces this critique. Decades of studies examining police presence, staffing levels, and enforcement strategies show that increases in policing produce, at best, modest and inconsistent reductions in violent crime, with effects varying across jurisdictions and historical contexts (Levitt 2004; Chalfin and McCrary 2017). By contrast, structural conditions such as concentrated poverty, residential segregation, economic inequality, and social disinvestment exert far greater influence on patterns of violence and community safety (Sharkey 2018). These findings suggest that policing addresses symptoms of violence more often than its underlying causes.

Legal scholarship similarly demonstrates that race in the United States has been actively produced through law rather than merely reflected by it. Haney López (1996) shows how courts and statutes constructed whiteness as a legally protected status, shaping access to citizenship, property, and state protection while rendering racialized populations disproportionately subject to surveillance and coercion. Critical race theorists extend this insight to the operation of the state itself, arguing that institutions such as policing function as central mechanisms through which racial hierarchy is reproduced and legitimated under the guise of neutrality (Bell 1980; Bracey 2014). From this perspective, law does not simply fail to constrain police violence; it actively authorizes and normalizes it, transforming coercive force into procedurally legitimate governance.

A parallel literature interrogates the role of American federalism in structuring this authority. Federalism refers to the constitutional division of governing power between national and subnational governments. In the United States, this arrangement grants substantial autonomy to states and municipalities over policing, producing a highly decentralized system with thousands of independent law enforcement agencies. Sociological and sociolegal research shows that this fragmentation diffuses responsibility while preserving local discretion over coercive authority (Varsanyi et al. 2010; Ulmer and Bradley 2019). Rather than functioning solely as a system of democratic checks and balances, federalism often produces a legal terrain in which accountability is procedurally dispersed and substantively elusive. Overlapping mandates, discretionary authority, and jurisdictional fragmentation allow state violence to fall through institutional gaps, reframing structural harm as administrative failure rather than institutional design (Swan 2023). Even when federal intervention occurs, such as through consent decrees or reform mandates, enforcement remains partial, reversible, and dependent on local cooperation, reinforcing the structural insulation of police power.

Organizational analyses of policing further demonstrate how reform efforts become contained within this broader institutional architecture. Studies of reform diffusion and administrative governance show that policy changes often spread through bureaucratic networks, professional standards, and compliance frameworks rather than through democratic accountability, limiting their transformative capacity (Garland 2023). Research on surveillance technologies and data-driven policing likewise illustrates how legal and institutional frameworks expand police authority while preserving organizational control over how accountability is defined and measured (Brayne 2020; Cheng 2024). In this context, legitimacy discourse often

functions as a mechanism of containment, framing police violence as a failure of implementation rather than as a predictable outcome of institutional design.

Taken together, this literature indicates that understanding police violence requires beginning not with individual behavior or discrete reform initiatives but with the constitutional and institutional arrangements that render such violence predictable, lawful, and resistant to democratic challenge. By foregrounding federalism and legal design as foundational architectures of unaccountability, this dissertation examines how structural logic interacts with disciplinary autonomy, hegemonic legitimation, and interpersonal harm to sustain the persistence of police power.

THE STRUCTURAL DOMAIN: THE U.S. FEDERALIST LEGAL SYSTEM

The U.S. federalist legal system produces a form of police power that is decentralized, discretionary, and structurally insulated from accountability. Historically, this system has been oriented toward managing racialized labor and social order rather than promoting public safety. Federalism distributes authority across multiple levels of government, diffusing responsibility for policing while preserving broad discretionary power at the local level. This arrangement is not incidental. It is a defining feature of the structural domain of power, embedding police authority into the legal architecture of governance itself and making meaningful constraint difficult to achieve.

The Federal Government

Within this federalist structure, federal authority over policing is constitutionally limited, procedurally indirect, and unevenly divided across branches of government. The legislative

branch shapes policing primarily through funding, statutory authorization, and conditional grants rather than direct regulation. Because the Constitution grants primary police powers to the states, Congress lacks general authority to govern local policing directly. Instead, it relies heavily on the Spending Clause[1] to incentivize compliance with federal priorities.

Major legislative interventions illustrate the structural limits of this approach. The Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration and established a large-scale federal funding stream for local police agencies, dramatically expanding police staffing, equipment, and institutional capacity. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 further intensified this expansion by funding the hiring of more than 100,000 police officers nationwide and supporting surveillance technologies, prison construction, and expanded enforcement infrastructure. While these laws occasionally included reform-oriented provisions, such as data reporting requirements or training programs, their primary effect was to expand policing capacity rather than impose enforceable constraints on police power.

Recent legislative debates illustrate the persistence of these structural limitations. In response to nationwide protests following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, members of Congress introduced the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which proposed reforms including national use-of-force standards, restrictions on qualified immunity, expanded federal investigations of police misconduct, and limitations on police militarization. Despite significant public support, the legislation repeatedly stalled in Congress and ultimately failed to pass. Disagreements over qualified immunity, federal authority over local policing, and partisan

[1] The Spending Clause (Article I, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution) grants Congress the authority to tax and spend for the general welfare. Congress frequently uses this authority to influence state and local policy by attaching conditions to federal funding. Because direct federal regulation of local policing is constitutionally limited, conditional grants have become a primary mechanism through which Congress attempts to shape policing practices.

polarization prevented legislative consensus. These failures underscore a central feature of federalism: even in moments of widespread public mobilization, Congress possesses limited tools for directly restructuring local police institutions.

The executive branch exercises influence primarily through the administration of federal law enforcement agencies, administrative rulemaking, and Department of Justice oversight. Federal agencies including the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Department of Homeland Security, and Immigration and Customs Enforcement operate alongside local policing institutions and frequently collaborate through task forces and joint enforcement initiatives. The Department of Justice also possesses authority to investigate police departments for patterns or practices of unconstitutional conduct under the Civil Rights Act of 1994. These investigations may result in negotiated court agreements known as consent decrees[2] intended to reform departmental policies and practices.

In practice, however, federal oversight is both discretionary and limited in scope. Only a small fraction of the approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States have ever been subject to federal investigation. Even when consent decrees are implemented, they are time-limited, unevenly enforced, and frequently lifted before deep organizational transformation occurs, as later chapters examining departments in Detroit and Prince George's County demonstrate. Executive authority has also simultaneously expanded policing through federal task forces, military equipment transfer programs, and interagency partnerships that blur the boundaries between local and federal law enforcement.

[2] A consent decree is a court-enforced agreement between the U.S. Department of Justice and a law enforcement agency found to have engaged in a pattern or practice of unconstitutional conduct. Consent decrees typically require departments to implement policy reforms, enhanced training, data reporting, and external monitoring for a specified period of time.

Recent developments illustrate how executive authority can further centralize coercive power. Since 2025, executive initiatives have expanded the operational scope and resources of Immigration and Customs Enforcement under the Department of Homeland Security as part of intensified immigration enforcement efforts. Critics argue that these expansions have coincided with increased reports of aggressive enforcement tactics and constitutional violations, highlighting how federal enforcement regimes can replicate the same patterns of coercion, racialized surveillance, and limited accountability that characterize local policing institutions (Sanchez and Ray 2026).

The judicial branch has played the most consequential role in structuring police power by defining the constitutional boundaries of law enforcement authority. Through interpretations of the Fourth, Fifth, and Fourteenth Amendments, the Supreme Court has repeatedly expanded police discretion while narrowing avenues for accountability. Legal doctrines such as qualified immunity, judicial deference to officer judgment, and permissive standards governing searches, seizures, and use of force have embedded broad discretionary authority[3] into constitutional law itself. Rather than functioning as a sustained check on state violence, judicial precedent has normalized coercive policing as a matter of professional judgment and legal reasonableness.

Taken together, federal oversight operates less as a system of restraint than as a mechanism of legitimation. Congress expands resources without imposing structural limits, the executive intervenes episodically while simultaneously expanding enforcement capacity, and courts entrench discretion through constitutional doctrine. Federalism ensures that authority

[3] Discretionary authority refers to the legally recognized ability of police officers to make situational decisions about enforcement actions, including whether to stop, search, arrest, or use force. While discretion is often justified as necessary for effective policing, broad discretionary authority can also enable unequal enforcement and limit avenues for accountability.

remains intact even as responsibility is diffused across institutions. This fragmentation makes police power expansive, normalized, and difficult to challenge through any single institutional pathway.

Federalism & State Power

States occupy a pivotal position within the federalist organization of policing. While state authority over law enforcement is often framed as enabling democratic responsiveness and local innovation, in practice it has frequently functioned to protect and expand police power. State governments define the legal conditions under which policing operates by setting civil liability standards, regulating collective bargaining agreements with police unions, mandating funding levels, and preempting municipal reform efforts (Rushin 2017; Thacher 2020). Through these mechanisms, states retain substantial authority over policing while remaining institutionally removed from the everyday exercise of police power. This arrangement allows states to insulate law enforcement from local political pressure while preserving broad discretionary authority at the street level.

Recent legislative activity illustrates the central role states play in shaping the trajectory of policing reform. Empirical analyses of state-level policing legislation enacted between 2020 and 2024 indicate that the majority of bills strengthened law enforcement authority rather than constraining it (Ray and Moore 2024). Many states adopted measures that expanded legal protections for police officers or limited the capacity of municipalities to enact structural reforms. Common provisions included statutory funding guarantees for police departments,

expanded officer immunity protections, enhanced criminal penalties for offenses against law enforcement, and restrictions on protest activity and public demonstrations.[4]

Southern and Midwestern states were particularly active in expanding these protections. Florida, Iowa, and Oklahoma enacted legislation increasing penalties for protest-related offenses and broadening legal protections for officers accused of misconduct. Texas and Louisiana expanded so-called "Blue Lives Matter" statutes, classifying violence against police officers as hate crimes and increasing criminal penalties associated with such offenses[5]. Meanwhile, states such as Missouri, Georgia, and Arkansas enacted laws limiting the ability of local governments to reduce police budgets or restructure police departments, effectively guaranteeing minimum funding levels regardless of local political priorities (Ray and Moore 2024).

Even in states that enacted reform-oriented legislation following the protests of 2020, structural expansion often accompanied symbolic constraint. Colorado and Minnesota, for example, passed reforms addressing use-of-force standards, body camera requirements, and data reporting mandates while simultaneously increasing funding for police training programs, surveillance technologies, and departmental infrastructure (Brookings Institution 2021; Ray 2022). These reforms introduced new accountability mechanisms while also expanding the organizational capacity of policing institutions.

More broadly, analyses of state reform packages show that many policy changes emphasized administrative adjustments such as training standards, reporting requirements, or

[4] Several states enacted legislation following the 2020 protests that increased penalties for protest-related offenses such as blocking traffic, damaging property during demonstrations, or interfering with police activity. Critics argue that these laws expand state authority to suppress protest while framing demonstrations against police violence as threats to public order.

[5] "Blue Lives Matter" laws designate violence against law enforcement officers as a hate crime or protected offense category. Supporters argue that these statutes recognize the risks associated with policing, while critics contend that they symbolically elevate police officers as a protected class while expanding criminal penalties and reinforcing state authority.

procedural modifications rather than structural limits on police authority. These measures often produced visible signals of responsiveness without fundamentally altering the legal frameworks that govern policing (Rushin 2017; Ray 2022). In practice, reform initiatives frequently became absorbed into existing institutional arrangements, reinforcing police authority even as they purported to constrain it.

State-level governance further diffuses accountability through bureaucratic delay and legal maneuvering. Legislative reforms are commonly implemented through administrative rulemaking processes, agency oversight boards, and regulatory frameworks that unfold gradually over time. Departments may comply procedurally while maintaining existing enforcement practices, and oversight bodies often lack the enforcement capacity necessary to compel structural change. As a result, states frequently present reform as evidence of responsiveness while relying on slow bureaucratic processes and legal complexity to avoid substantive accountability. Within the federalist system, these dynamics allow police power to expand while responsibility for its consequences remains institutionally diffuse.

Local Government

At the local level, the structural effects of American federalism become most visible. The United States maintains more than 18,000 law enforcement agencies, each operating under distinct policies, contracts, budgets, and political conditions (Reaves 2015; U.S. Department of Justice 2020). This extreme decentralization of authority prevents the development and implementation of uniform standards and produces wide variation in accountability across jurisdictions. Rather than enabling meaningful democratic control, local governance often

operates within narrow institutional constraints imposed by state law, collective bargaining agreements, and federal funding incentives (Walker 2014).

Municipal governments exercise day-to-day responsibility for policing but possess limited authority to restructure police power. Collective bargaining agreements and state labor protections frequently insulate officers from discipline, restrict civilian oversight, and limit the use of disciplinary records in termination proceedings (Rushin 2017; Harmon 2012). As a result, cities and counties absorb public backlash following incidents of police violence while remaining institutionally constrained from altering the organizational conditions that produce such harm.

Within this context, local reform efforts often take symbolic rather than structural form. Police departments adopt visible compliance measures such as body-worn cameras, transparency dashboards, and revised use-of-force policies while preserving broad discretionary authority and internal control over enforcement practices (Brayne 2020; Lum et al. 2019). These reforms can enhance administrative legitimacy and public transparency without redistributing authority or meaningfully constraining officer discretion. Even when federal oversight occurs, implementation remains uneven and fragile. Reforms imposed through consent decrees frequently erode once external monitoring ends, as illustrated by the long-term instability of reforms following the Department of Justice investigation of the Ferguson Police Department.[6]

Local autonomy therefore functions less as a mechanism of democratic accountability than as a site of institutional containment. Municipal governments respond to community demands, negotiate incremental reforms, and manage public relations crises following high-

[6] The U.S. Department of Justice's 2015 investigation of the Ferguson Police Department found widespread constitutional violations, including racially discriminatory policing practices, unlawful stops and arrests, and the use of municipal fines and fees to generate city revenue. The resulting consent decree required extensive reforms in training, supervision, and community engagement. However, subsequent evaluations suggest that many reforms weakened or stalled once federal monitoring diminished, illustrating the fragility of externally imposed police reform.

profile incidents of police violence. However, the structural foundations of police authority remain largely beyond local control. Responsibility for harm is concentrated at the municipal level, where elected officials face public scrutiny, while the legal authority governing policing is shaped by state preemption, union protections, and federal judicial doctrine. In this way, federalism localizes responsibility while diffusing authority across multiple institutional layers.

These dynamics constitute the structural domain of police power. Federal, state, and local institutions collectively produce a legal and administrative architecture that entrenches coercive authority while obscuring responsibility for violence and abuse. Rather than enabling effective democratic oversight, the fragmentation of authority across jurisdictions stabilizes police power by making accountability procedurally complex and politically diffuse.

The Historical Development of Policing as Racialized-Labor Control

The development of policing in the United States cannot be separated from the political–economic structures that shaped early state formation. Rather than emerging simply as a neutral response to crime, policing developed within a system organized around the management of labor, territory, and racial hierarchy. Scholars of racial capitalism argue that systems of racial domination and economic extraction developed together, producing institutions designed to stabilize exploitative economic relations through coercive authority (Du Bois 1935; Robinson 1983). In this framework, policing emerged as one of the key mechanisms through which racialized labor hierarchies were enforced and maintained.

While regional economic structures differed across the early United States, both relied on racialized systems of labor discipline. The plantation economies of the South depended on chattel slavery and the legal dehumanization of Black labor. Northern industrial economies,

though formally based on wage labor, similarly relied on racialized, gendered, and immigrant labor segmentation to suppress wages, divide workers, and prevent collective resistance (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991).[7] These distinct economic arrangements nevertheless converged in a shared institutional solution: the delegation of coercive authority to locally controlled policing institutions tasked with regulating laboring populations and maintaining social order.

Federalism played a critical role in enabling this convergence. By embedding primary police powers within state and local jurisdictions, the federal system allowed coercive governance to adapt to regional economic needs while remaining insulated from national democratic constraint. Southern states could maintain policing institutions rooted in slave patrols and post-emancipation labor control regimes, while Northern cities developed professional police departments tasked with managing industrial conflict, regulating public space, and suppressing labor unrest (Spruill 2019; Muhammad 2010). The constitutional distribution of authority therefore allowed policing institutions to evolve in ways that supported regionally specific economic systems while preserving a shared underlying function: the regulation of marginalized labor.

These historical patterns persist in contemporary governance structures. Modern state-level protections for law enforcement do not represent a departure from earlier institutional arrangements but rather a continuation of a federal system designed to safeguard coercive authority in service of racialized capitalism. Through mechanisms such as municipal preemption, funding mandates, and expanded legal protections for officers, states convert policing into a politically durable institution capable of absorbing reform pressures without redistributing power (Bracey 2014; Garland 2001). State power thus functions as a critical intermediary within the

[7] Du Bois argues that systems of racial hierarchy in both the North and South were central to maintaining labor discipline and preventing cross-racial worker solidarity following emancipation.

structural domain, translating constitutional design into durable protection for police authority while limiting the transformative capacity of local democratic action.

From the colonial period forward, policing institutions were organized around regulating populations perceived as threats to economic order. These populations included enslaved Black people, Indigenous communities resisting dispossession, and later, low-wage industrial workers. Although the specific targets of repression varied across regions and historical periods, the underlying logic remained consistent: policing served as a mechanism for stabilizing extractive economic systems by disciplining labor and suppressing resistance (Du Bois 1935; Robinson 1983; Neocleous 2000).

In the colonial South, policing grew directly from slave patrols and local sheriffs tasked with enforcing slave codes, recovering escaped enslaved people, and suppressing rebellion. These patrol systems[8] institutionalized racial surveillance and violence as central features of governance, embedding the protection of white property rights and racial hierarchy into everyday enforcement practices (Spruill 2019; Alexander 2010). At the same time, colonial and early federal authorities mobilized militias, rangers, and military forces to dispossess Indigenous nations and secure land for settler expansion. These coercive practices were foundational to state formation, linking policing to territorial conquest and settler colonial governance (Dunbar-Ortiz 2014; Wolfe 2006; Go 2018).

In the industrializing North, where wage labor replaced chattel slavery as the dominant economic system, policing developed as a tool for regulating an increasingly precarious workforce. Early professional police departments emerged in direct response to labor unrest,

[8] Slave patrols were organized groups of armed white citizens authorized by colonial and state governments to monitor enslaved populations, enforce slave codes, and suppress rebellion. Many scholars identify these patrol systems as direct institutional predecessors of modern policing in the American South.

strikes, and mass protest. Police forces were routinely deployed to break strikes, suppress unionization efforts, and protect industrial capital from disruption (Muhammad 2010; Vitale 2017). Although Northern policing relied less explicitly on racial language in law than Southern systems of racial control, it nonetheless depended on racialized, ethnic, and gendered divisions to maintain labor discipline. Immigrants, women, children, and newly emancipated Black workers were positioned within segmented labor markets where policing helped enforce hierarchical relations between capital and labor (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991).

Across regions, policing functioned as a state response to a shared structural problem: how to extract labor while preventing collective resistance. Racialization was not incidental to this process; it was the mechanism that rendered coercive governance politically viable. By dividing workers along racial, ethnic, and gendered lines, policing helped stabilize economic systems dependent on exploitation while deflecting broader class-based challenges to economic power (Robinson 1983; Wacquant 2009).

This historical lineage situates modern policing not as a deviation from democratic ideals but as a durable institution embedded within the governance of racialized capitalism. From slave patrols and settler militias to strikebreaking and urban order maintenance, policing has consistently functioned as a mechanism through which racialized labor hierarchies are enforced and normalized. These origins continue to shape contemporary governance by embedding police authority within the foundational structures of American federalism. As a result, reform efforts that target individual policies or departments often fail to confront the deeper institutional architecture that sustains coercive power across time.

Professionalization the Myth of Neutral Policing

The professionalization of American policing refers to a series of organizational reforms introduced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that sought to transform policing from a politically controlled, decentralized practice into a bureaucratic institution governed by standardized procedures, training, and administrative oversight. Reformers associated with the Progressive Era, including figures such as August Vollmer and O.W. Wilson, advocated for centralized command structures, merit-based hiring, formal training academies, and the adoption of scientific management techniques intended to insulate policing from partisan politics. These reforms are often portrayed as a progressive transformation that replaced informal and violent policing practices with a rational institution oriented toward public safety. This narrative obscures a more consequential shift. Professionalization did not dismantle policing's role in labor control and racial governance; it rebranded coercive power as neutral expertise, embedding police authority more deeply within the legal and political order (Neocleous 2000; Vitale 2017).

Early professional police departments adopted organizational structures drawn in part from military institutions. Uniforms, rank hierarchies, centralized command systems, standardized patrol routines, and regimented training programs were intended to produce disciplined, predictable enforcement bodies capable of maintaining order in rapidly industrializing cities. These reforms created the appearance of impartiality and administrative distance from overt political conflict. Yet the expansion of professional policing coincided with intensified efforts to suppress labor movements, regulate public space, and discipline marginalized populations. Rather than constraining police power, professionalization expanded discretion, allowing officers to selectively enforce laws in ways that protected elite interests while appearing administratively neutral (Monkkonen 1981; Muhammad 2010).

The myth of neutrality rests on the assumption that policing responds to crime rather than actively producing social order. In practice, professionalization shifted the justification for coercion from explicit racial domination to ostensibly objective concerns such as "public order," "safety," and "crime control." This rhetorical transformation allowed police institutions to continue targeting racialized and working-class communities while presenting such practices as impartial responses to disorder. Violence became framed as an unfortunate but necessary feature of law enforcement, while instances of misconduct were interpreted as individual deviations rather than structural outcomes of institutional design (Garland 2001; Wacquant 2009).

This ideological transformation was reinforced through several institutional processes. First, courts expanded officer discretion while limiting avenues for legal accountability. Judicial doctrines emphasizing deference to officer judgment and good-faith enforcement created legal protections that insulated police decision-making from sustained constitutional scrutiny (Harmon 2012; Rushin 2017). By framing discretionary decisions as professional expertise rather than political judgment, courts reinforced the image of policing as a neutral administrative function.

Second, police training regimes increasingly emphasized threat perception, officer survival, and command compliance. Training curricula frequently center on the anticipation of danger and the prioritization of officer safety, reinforcing occupational narratives that position civilians as potential threats and legitimize preemptive uses of force (Sierra-Arévalo 2021). These frameworks shape how officers interpret encounters with the public, producing patterns of suspicion and escalation that disproportionately affect marginalized communities.

Third, contemporary reform efforts have increasingly focused on procedural adjustments rather than structural change. Policies such as body-worn cameras, data reporting requirements, early warning systems, and procedural justice training aim to improve transparency and

professional conduct without fundamentally redistributing authority or constraining police discretion (Lum et al. 2019; Brayne 2020). These reforms often generate new layers of administrative oversight while leaving the underlying legal and organizational structures of policing intact.

Professionalization therefore did not represent a break from policing's origins in racialized labor control. Instead, it marked the moment when those origins were reframed through the language of bureaucratic expertise and administrative neutrality. By transforming coercion into technical competence and domination into professional governance, professional policing secured its position as an indispensable arm of the modern state. The enduring power of policing lies not only in its capacity for force, but in the success of the institutional myth that such force is neutral, necessary, and beyond politics.

The Emergence of Professionalized Policing and Labor Control

During the decades preceding the Civil War, Black and Indigenous communities bore the brunt of state-sanctioned violence that reinforced a racialized labor hierarchy. Scholarly and popular accounts often emphasize Southern slave patrols as the primary institutional precursor to American policing. While these informal patrol systems were central to racial control in the slaveholding South, the emergence of professionalized police departments occurred first in Northern cities. This timing reveals a broader political–economic function of policing that extended beyond the direct enforcement of slavery (Monkkonen 1981; Wilentz 1984).

The first modern professional police department in the United States was established in Boston in 1838. Municipal leaders publicly justified its creation as a response to rising crime and disorder, reflecting broader nineteenth-century concerns about urbanization and immigration

(Lane 1967). Historical evidence, however, suggests that the formation of the Boston Police Department was closely connected to escalating labor unrest rather than to crime alone. The Panic of 1837, triggered by financial speculation and banking collapse, produced widespread unemployment, wage cuts of up to twenty-five percent, and severe economic distress among working-class residents, particularly Irish immigrant laborers (Wilentz 1984). Workers confronted long hours, dangerous conditions, and the criminalization of collective organizing. At the same time, urban elites feared that economic crisis and organized labor protest would destabilize social order. Violent confrontations between workers, employers, and volunteer watchmen preceded the creation of the Boston police force, suggesting that professional policing emerged as a response to labor conflict and elite insecurity rather than public safety alone (Monkkonen 1981).

Similar dynamics unfolded in other Northern cities during the 1840s and 1850s. In New York, labor conflicts such as the Dockworkers' Strike of 1840 and the Anti-Rent movement[9] mobilized thousands of workers and tenant farmers against exploitative land and labor arrangements (Wilentz 1984; Stansell 1987). In the midst of these conflicts, the New York City Police Department was established in 1845, replacing the decentralized night watch system and consolidating state authority to manage urban unrest (Monkkonen 1981). Comparable patterns appeared across emerging industrial centers. Cincinnati experienced sustained labor unrest during the late 1840s, followed by the establishment of a formal police department in 1853. Philadelphia's General Trades' Union and the labor conflicts surrounding the Great Strike of 1852 contributed to the professionalization of its police force in 1854. Baltimore established a

[9] The Anti-Rent movement was a series of tenant uprisings in upstate New York during the 1830s and 1840s in which farmers resisted quasi-feudal rent systems inherited from colonial land grants. These protests often involved organized resistance, tax refusal, and clashes with law enforcement authorities.

municipal police department in 1853 following escalating labor tensions among dockworkers and transportation workers. Chicago followed shortly thereafter. Amid railroad strikes and widespread labor agitation in the early 1850s, the Chicago Police Department was created in 1855 and was quickly deployed to suppress organized labor activity (Monkkonen 1981; Vitale 2017).

These developments occurred in Northern states prior to the Civil War and alongside a separate but related system of racial control in the South. Southern slave patrols, organized to monitor enslaved populations, enforce slave codes, and suppress rebellion, operated as a decentralized system of racial surveillance and coercion (Spruill 2019). Although Northern police departments were not formally organized around slavery, they nonetheless relied on racialized, ethnic, and gendered distinctions to divide the working class and legitimate coercive governance. Immigrants, women, children, and free Black laborers were frequently portrayed as disorderly, dangerous, or expendable, while police authority was mobilized to defend property and industrial capital (Du Bois 1935; Roediger 1991). These divisions fostered downward wage competition and helped prevent cross-racial worker solidarity, reinforcing the broader racialized labor hierarchy upon which American economic development depended.

These cases demonstrate that professional policing in the United States emerged not primarily as a response to crime but as a mechanism for managing labor conflict, suppressing collective action, and protecting elite economic interests. In both the North and the South, policing institutions developed as tools for stabilizing economic systems dependent on racialized and exploited labor.

This institutional alignment became even more pronounced following the Civil War. During Reconstruction, Southern states expanded policing institutions to enforce Black Codes[10], regulate the mobility of freedpeople, and compel labor through systems such as vagrancy laws and convict leasing (Du Bois 1935; Alexander 2010). At the same time, Northern police departments continued to suppress labor organizing and urban unrest. These parallel developments allowed policing institutions across regions to converge around a shared function: the regulation of marginalized populations through coercive authority.

What began as localized responses to labor unrest and elite anxiety thus became embedded within the broader legal and political architecture of the United States. Through federalism, policing authority remained largely concentrated at the state and local level, allowing coercive governance to adapt to regional economic conditions while remaining insulated from national democratic oversight. In this way, the early history of American policing illustrates how institutions initially created to manage labor conflict and racial hierarchy became normalized as a central component of democratic state power.

The Evolution of Law and Policing

The entrenchment of modern police power is best understood through the post–Civil War legal order that embedded coercive authority within American federalism. The Fourteenth Amendment[11] (1868) was formally designed to empower the federal government to protect civil rights against abusive state and local governments, particularly in the wake of emancipation. In

[10] Black Codes were laws enacted across the post–Civil War South that restricted the freedom and mobility of formerly enslaved people, often criminalizing unemployment or minor infractions in order to compel Black labor through arrest, fines, and convict leasing.

[11] The Fourteenth Amendment guarantees citizenship, due process, and equal protection under the law. It was adopted during Reconstruction to protect formerly enslaved people from discriminatory state laws and violence.

theory, it created a constitutional mechanism for constraining racialized policing in the South, where freedpeople were criminalized under Black Codes and vagrancy laws. In practice, however, Supreme Court jurisprudence quickly narrowed the amendment's reach, preserving state control over policing while foreclosing meaningful federal accountability (Du Bois 1935; Alexander 2010).

Early decisions such as The Slaughter-House Cases[12] (1873) and United States v. Cruikshank[13] (1876) sharply limited the federal government's ability to intervene in cases of racial violence. These rulings signaled that protecting Black citizens from both state and vigilante terror fell largely outside the scope of federal responsibility. Civil rights enforcement was effectively relegated to the states, while state "police powers" were affirmed as the primary legal authority governing public order and violence (Bell 1980; Haney López 1996). As a result, local sheriffs and police departments were empowered to enforce racialized labor control with minimal federal oversight while courts retreated from the promise of equal protection.

Following the collapse of Reconstruction, Southern states consolidated Jim Crow regimes through laws that criminalized Black mobility, labor autonomy, and political participation. Police enforced segregation statutes, chain gangs, and convict leasing systems that reproduced racial domination through the criminal legal system (Blackmon 2008; Muhammad 2010). The Supreme Court's decision in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) constitutionalized this order by legitimating segregation under the doctrine of "separate but equal," further embedding police enforcement of racial hierarchy within constitutional law. Throughout this period, courts routinely deferred to

[12] *In* The Slaughter-House Cases*, the* Supreme Court of the United States *interpreted the* Fourteenth Amendment *narrowly, holding that the Privileges or Immunities Clause protected only limited national citizenship rights, thereby sharply restricting federal authority to protect civil rights against state abuses.*

[13] *United States v. Cruikshank* severely limited federal prosecution of racial terror groups such as the Ku Klux Klan by ruling that most civil rights protections applied only to state actions, not to private actors.

state authority under the doctrine of police powers, while Congress avoided sustained civil rights enforcement in order to preserve sectional political compromise (Du Bois 1935).

Mid-twentieth-century civil rights reforms initially appeared to disrupt this legal architecture. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 expanded federal authority over states and marked the first significant federal intervention into racial governance since Reconstruction. The violent repression of civil rights protests by local police forces, including the widely publicized brutality of Birmingham police under Commissioner Bull Connor, revealed the central role of local law enforcement in maintaining racial hierarchy (Branch 1988). At the same time, Supreme Court decisions such as Mapp v. Ohio (1961) and Miranda v. Arizona (1966) extended constitutional protections against unreasonable searches and self-incrimination to state policing through the incorporation doctrine[14].

Yet these reforms were accompanied, and ultimately undermined, by doctrinal developments that expanded police discretion. In Terry v. Ohio (1968), the Supreme Court authorized investigatory stops and limited searches based on "reasonable suspicion," a standard significantly lower than probable cause[15]. This ruling effectively constitutionalized proactive policing practices such as stop-and-frisk, permitting routine surveillance and coercive encounters with minimal judicial scrutiny. Subsequent decisions further entrenched discretionary authority by prioritizing officer judgment over individual rights, ensuring that civil rights protections remained narrow, procedural, and unevenly enforced (Stuntz 2011; Carbado 2017). Federal

[14] The incorporation doctrine refers to the process through which the Supreme Court applied protections contained in the Bill of Rights to the states through the Fourteenth Amendment.

[15] A key distinction in Fourth Amendment to the United States Constitution jurisprudence is that reasonable suspicion permits brief investigatory stops based on specific, articulable facts suggesting criminal activity, while probable cause requires a higher evidentiary threshold sufficient to justify arrest or search.

oversight therefore remained fragmented and insufficient to dismantle the structural foundations of police power.

From the 1970s forward, federal criminal justice policy further deepened this institutional arrangement. The War on Drugs expanded federal funding streams for local policing, while mandatory minimum sentencing laws, military equipment transfers, and intergovernmental task forces significantly increased the capacity of law enforcement agencies without corresponding accountability mechanisms (Alexander 2010; Wacquant 2009). The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 institutionalized this approach by channeling federal resources into local policing through programs such as the Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS)[16] program while leaving disciplinary authority firmly in local hands. Supreme Court decisions including Whren v. United States (1996) and Atwater v. City of Lago Vista (2001) further legitimized pretextual stops and custodial arrests for minor offenses, insulating discretionary policing from meaningful constitutional challenge[17].

Across these historical periods, federalism functioned less as a system of democratic constraint than as an architecture of insulation. Authority over policing remained decentralized, while responsibility for violence was diffused across levels of government. Courts expanded discretionary authority while disclaiming affirmative duties to protect citizens from harm, as seen in decisions such as DeShaney v. Winnebago County (1989) and Town of Castle Rock v. Gonzales (2005). Legislatures supplied resources without enforceable limits, and executive interventions remained episodic and reversible. The legal system therefore normalized police

[16] The Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) program provides federal funding to local law enforcement agencies for hiring officers, purchasing technology, and supporting policing initiatives.

[17] *Whren v. United States* allowed officers to conduct traffic stops based on minor violations even when the underlying motivation was to investigate unrelated suspected crimes. *Atwater v. Lago Vista* permitted custodial arrests for minor offenses punishable only by fines.

violence as lawful, reasonable, and administratively necessary rather than as a form of state harm (Haney López 1996; Moore 2021).

This legal evolution reveals the core contradiction of the structural domain. Constitutional law does not simply fail to restrain police power; it actively produces the conditions under which coercive authority is rendered legitimate and durable. By embedding policing within federalism and doctrines of discretion, law transforms racialized state violence into a routine feature of governance rather than a deviation from democratic ideals. These structural protections do not determine how police power is exercised in every encounter, but they create the permissive environment in which disciplinary practices, organizational cultures, hegemonic narratives, and interpersonal harms are reproduced.

Structural Incentives and the Persistence of Police Power

As freed Black populations migrated, labor markets reorganized, and industrial capitalism expanded, professionalized police forces developed as institutions tasked with enforcing racial hierarchy, disciplining labor, and protecting property. These departments did not emerge as neutral guardians of public safety. Rather, they were institutional responses to the perceived threats posed by newly mobile workers, formerly enslaved populations, and rapidly changing urban economies. Federalism played a critical role in stabilizing this arrangement. By distributing authority across federal, state, and local governments, the federalist system enabled each level of government to claim nominal oversight while deflecting responsibility for violence and abuse. Local governments exercised day-to-day coercive authority, states shielded police through funding mandates and legal protections, and federal institutions deferred under the guise of constitutional restraint.

Fiscal and legal incentives further entrenched this system. Federal grants, counterterrorism funding, and civil asset forfeiture programs reward enforcement expansion rather than harm reduction, encouraging police agencies to prioritize arrest, surveillance, and resource acquisition. State laws often restrict municipal authority to significantly reduce police budgets or alter labor agreements, limiting the capacity of local governments to restructure policing even when political demand for reform exists. Courts reinforce these dynamics by privileging officer discretion and granting broad immunity to departments, transforming structural violence into legally sanctioned judgment calls. Within this institutional architecture, reform efforts that focus on training, procedural rules, or technological oversight leave the underlying incentive structure largely intact.

Constitutional protections such as due process and formal neutrality therefore function in paradoxical ways. While these principles are designed to safeguard individual rights, they also operate within a legal framework that preserves wide discretionary authority for law enforcement. As a result, racialized state power can persist without requiring explicitly discriminatory law. Policing endures not because it consistently produces safety, but because it remains a politically and administratively convenient mechanism for managing inequality, labor conflict, and social marginalization without redistributing resources or altering the broader political economy. These dynamics extend beyond policing itself, as research shows that racialized administrative burdens in safety-net systems systematically shape how families navigate the state, often reproducing inequality through ostensibly neutral bureaucratic processes (Amerikaner et al. 2025). The persistence of police power is therefore best understood as the predictable outcome of a constitutional system that protects decentralized coercive authority while obscuring accountability across levels of governance.

The Structural Domain and the Organization of the Racialized Labor Hierarchy

Examining policing through the structural domain reveals that the endurance of police violence is not primarily the result of policy failure or institutional inertia. Rather, it reflects a constitutional and federalist architecture that protects discretionary authority while dispersing responsibility for harm. Law and federalism establish the conditions under which policing expands by supplying legal authority, funding streams, and jurisdictional autonomy that stabilize coercive power. These arrangements do not determine the outcome of every police encounter, but they create the institutional environment in which discretionary practices and organizational routines are normalized.

Importantly, the fragmentation produced by federalism generates a form of bureaucratic opacity that shields police institutions from sustained accountability. When violence occurs, responsibility is dispersed across multiple actors and levels of government. Municipal officials point to state law and union contracts that limit disciplinary authority. States defer to local control over policing. Federal authorities intervene only episodically and often lack the legal mechanisms or political will to impose durable oversight. This fragmentation produces what might be understood as a bureaucratic fog in which responsibility for harm becomes difficult to locate, allowing police institutions to adapt to reform pressures without fundamentally altering their authority. Police departments recognize and operate within this fragmented system, strategically navigating legal and administrative boundaries that protect them from meaningful sanction.

Within this framework, the structural domain organizes a racialized division of labor in the governance of social order. Policymakers occupy positions that manage legitimacy through

legislation and administrative process. Law enforcement officers serve as street-level enforcers tasked with managing disorder through discretionary force. Community members, particularly those in racially marginalized neighborhoods, occupy the position of governed subjects who absorb the cumulative effects of surveillance, criminalization, and violence. These roles are not accidental outcomes of policy failure but predictable consequences of a legal system designed to maintain order while limiting structural challenges to authority.

Crucially, the structural domain reproduces racialized inequality without requiring explicit racial intent. By embedding discretion, immunity, and fragmented oversight into the legal foundations of policing, the state generates racially stratified outcomes under the appearance of procedural neutrality. Reform initiatives such as consent decrees, civilian oversight boards, and expanded training programs often operate within these same institutional constraints. They may improve transparency or administrative procedure, but they rarely redistribute authority or fundamentally alter the incentive structures that govern police behavior. The persistence of police violence despite repeated cycles of reform is therefore structural rather than anomalous.

The argument developed in this chapter establishes the legal and institutional conditions under which the remaining domains of the Matrix of Domination operate. The disciplinary domain examines how these structural incentives are translated into organizational practices within police departments. The hegemonic domain explores how narratives of safety, professionalism, and legitimacy justify and stabilize these arrangements. The interpersonal domain reveals how these institutional dynamics are experienced and reproduced in everyday encounters between police and the public. Together, these domains demonstrate that police

power is sustained not only through force but through an integrated system that organizes authority, legitimacy, and vulnerability across social positions.

Understanding the structural domain as the organizer of the racialized labor hierarchy clarifies why reform efforts frequently fail to produce substantive change. Without altering the legal foundations that allocate coercive authority and shield it from democratic constraint, reform remains limited to surface adjustments. The chapters that follow build on this foundation, moving from structural design to organizational practice, ideological legitimation, and lived experience in order to explain how police power persists even in moments of intense public scrutiny and political crisis.

This chapter demonstrates that the persistence of police violence cannot be understood solely through the actions of individual officers, departmental culture, or failed reform initiatives. It is rooted in the structural architecture of American governance. Federalism, constitutional doctrine, and legal precedent distribute coercive authority across multiple levels of government while fragmenting responsibility for harm. This arrangement creates a system in which police power is both expansive and insulated, capable of adapting to political pressure without fundamentally relinquishing authority. Within Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination, the structural domain establishes the rules under which the remaining domains operate. It defines who holds authority, who exercises coercive power, and who bears the costs of social order. The disciplinary domain translates these structural conditions into organizational routines and enforcement practices. The hegemonic domain legitimizes them through narratives of safety, professionalism, and necessity. The interpersonal domain renders these arrangements visible in the lived experiences of those who encounter policing in everyday life. Understanding this structural foundation is therefore essential. Without confronting the legal and institutional

design that organizes police power, reform efforts will continue to modify procedures while leaving the underlying architecture of domination intact.

CHAPTER 2:

ORGANIZATIONAL ENFORCEMENT OF POLICE POWER

Disciplinary Domain

Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination emphasizes that structural inequality does not reproduce itself automatically. It must be organized, enforced, and normalized through institutions (Collins 1990; Collins 2021). The disciplinary domain captures this process by identifying the bureaucratic and organizational mechanisms through which structural power is translated into routine governance. Applied to policing, the disciplinary domain reveals that police violence is not simply the product of individual misconduct or aberrant departmental culture. Rather, it is managed through institutional design, including training, supervision, evaluation, discipline, and reform apparatuses that shape how coercive power is exercised on the ground (Foucault 1977; Gordon 2020; Thacher 2020).

Whereas Chapter 1 argued that the structural domain insulates police power through federalism, constitutional doctrine, and political economy, this chapter examines how that insulation is operationalized within local police departments. It focuses on the disciplinary domain as the level at which broad structural protections are converted into everyday organizational routines. Training regimes, internal accountability systems, union contracts, performance metrics, and reform mandates shape how officers interpret threat, exercise discretion, and use force (Sierra-Arévalo 2021; Rushin 2017; Harmon 2012). These institutional mechanisms do not simply respond to violence after the fact. They structure the conditions under which violence becomes predictable, administratively defensible, and difficult to sanction.

The chapter's central argument is that decentralization functions as a disciplinary shield. Although local police departments appear highly varied across jurisdictions, this variation often obscures a deeper continuity. Departments adapt to oversight through technocratic containment, by which I mean the translation of political, legal, and moral critique into managerial problems of compliance, data, training, and procedural adjustment. Reform is not rejected outright. It is absorbed into administrative routines that preserve discretion, organizational autonomy, and institutional legitimacy. In this way, decentralization does not weaken police power. It helps protect it.

To develop this argument, the chapter draws on historical and organizational analysis of two departments: the Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland and the Detroit Police Department in Michigan. These cases are not presented primarily to compare officer narratives or local attitudes. Rather, they are used to show how departments operating in different racial, political, and economic contexts nonetheless reproduce similar disciplinary logics. Despite divergent histories, demographics, and reform trajectories, both departments illustrate how police organizations translate structural pressures into selective compliance, symbolic reform, and institutional self-preservation. Examining these cases demonstrates why police violence persists despite repeated waves of reform. Decentralization enables police institutions to manage critique, legitimate coercion, and reproduce violence as a routine feature of governance rather than an aberration.

DECENTRALIZATION AS A SHIELD FOR THE DISCIPLINARY DOMAIN

Where the structural domain explains how overlapping jurisdictions diffuse accountability, the disciplinary domain shows how those conditions are activated within local

institutions. Collins (1990; 2021) conceptualizes the disciplinary domain as the site where bureaucratic mechanisms and organizational routines translate structural inequality into everyday practice. In policing, decentralization ensures that local departments function as quasi-sovereign institutions, interpreting structural rules in ways that preserve organizational authority rather than constrain it.

With more than 18,000 distinct law enforcement agencies in the United States, decentralization disperses oversight to such a degree that uniform accountability is exceedingly difficult to impose (Reaves 2015). Each department develops its own training regimes, disciplinary procedures, performance metrics, and enforcement priorities, filtering national reform efforts through local bureaucratic logics. The result is not only uneven implementation across jurisdictions, but also a durable institutional shield. No single interdepartmental authority exists with the capacity to impose consistent accountability across departments, even though policing is shaped by broader state and federal systems (Walker 2014; Thacher 2020).

Federal consent decrees are intended to pierce this shield. They are negotiated by the U.S. Department of Justice, typically after civil rights investigations find patterns or practices of unconstitutional policing. Yet decentralization substantially blunts their impact. Consent decrees apply only to specific departments, leaving thousands of agencies untouched, and they rely on time-limited monitoring that can be weakened or reversed once formal oversight ends (Rushin 2016). Research on police reform has shown that departments frequently bureaucratize these mandates, converting demands for accountability into compliance metrics, reporting procedures, training modules, and documentation requirements that preserve discretion rather than constrain it. What appears as federal oversight often becomes a mechanism of disciplinary adaptation,

enabling departments to claim reform while maintaining control over its meaning and implementation (Beck and Holder 2022; Thacher 2020).

Police unions operate as an additional disciplinary shield. Unlike local departments, unions and fraternal organizations often extend across jurisdictions, demonstrating that police can in fact be organized through broader institutional umbrellas when those umbrellas protect rather than restrain police power. Through collective bargaining agreements, grievance procedures, and state labor law, unions secure contractual protections that restrict disciplinary authority, mandate arbitration procedures that can overturn managerial or civilian review, and limit public access to officer misconduct records (Rushin 2017; Harmon 2012). These protections are reinforced by political alliances, as elected officials frequently depend on police endorsements, public safety rhetoric, and union mobilization. Accountability is therefore constrained not only through law, but through institutional entanglement and political dependence.

Decentralization thus produces local police departments as quasi-sovereign entities that selectively comply with external mandates, translate oversight into symbolic reform, and fortify their authority through unions, proceduralism, and political alliances. It is not simply an administrative feature of American policing. It is a key mechanism through which the disciplinary domain protects power.

Inside the Disciplinary Domain

Disciplinary power in policing operates through organizational design, professional socialization, and bureaucratic technique rather than through explicit ideology alone. A substantial body of organizational scholarship demonstrates that police behavior is shaped less

by formal law on the books than by internal incentives, occupational norms, and disciplinary structures that reward compliance with departmental priorities over community accountability (Sherman 2004; Gordon 2019). Examples include promotion criteria tied to arrest activity or command loyalty, use-of-force review systems that prioritize procedural compliance over substantive harm, training curricula that elevate officer survival, and internal investigation processes that treat misconduct as exceptional rather than systemic. Within this framework, police violence is not an aberration. It is a routinized organizational outcome, produced through everyday practices that normalize coercion while rendering it administratively legible and morally neutral (Foucault 1977; Ray 2019).

Police departments also function as racialized organizations, meaning that ostensibly neutral rules distribute credibility, protection, and risk unevenly across racial groups (Ray 2019). Organizational procedures do not simply regulate behavior. They shape whose testimony is believed, what harms are documented, which complaints are sustained, and whose conduct is excused. This helps explain why internal accountability systems so often fail to produce meaningful discipline even where formal policies prohibit misconduct. Studies of patrol allocation, investigatory stops, misdemeanor enforcement, and discretionary surveillance show that police organizations routinely concentrate coercive authority in already marginalized communities (Gordon 2019; Beck and Holder 2022).

Professional socialization further stabilizes disciplinary power. Ethnographic research documents how officers are trained to internalize norms of solidarity, discretion, and threat anticipation, producing an "us versus them" orientation that distances police from the communities they patrol (Van Maanen 1975; Van Cleve 2016). Sierra-Arévalo's (2021) concept of the danger imperative is especially useful here. He argues that police culture is organized

around the anticipation of ever-present threat, regardless of actual levels of danger. This occupational orientation is reproduced through academy training, peer reinforcement, supervisory messaging, and organizational narratives that frame policing as inherently life-threatening work. Although the danger imperative is often presented in race-neutral terms, it operates through racialized assumptions about where danger resides and who poses threat, disproportionately positioning communities of color as legitimate targets of surveillance and force.

Technological and data-driven reforms further entrench disciplinary power rather than constraining it. Predictive policing systems, real-time crime centers, early warning systems, performance dashboards, and acoustic gunshot detection programs such as ShotSpotter do not eliminate discretion. They reorganize it within technical systems that appear objective and evidence-based (Brayne 2020). These tools extend the reach of preemptive intervention while embedding officer judgment within administrative frameworks of neutrality and efficiency. Because such systems are built on prior enforcement data, they routinely reproduce existing patterns of racialized surveillance rather than correcting them (Brayne 2020; Gordon 2019). Even when these technologies fail to improve safety or become publicly controversial, criticism is often absorbed into managerial debate rather than democratic reckoning. Questions about whether a system produces harm are reframed as questions of calibration, oversight, procurement, or data quality. This is what I mean by technocratic containment. Public demands for accountability are converted into administrative questions that leave the underlying enforcement infrastructure intact. In this way, disciplinary power transforms legitimacy crises into technical problems, redirecting critique away from institutional purpose and toward procedural refinement (Foucault 1977; Ray 2019).

Reform initiatives more broadly are governed through organizational learning and compliance frameworks that frame harm as an internal management problem rather than a political one. Use-of-force reviews, procedural justice reforms, implicit bias trainings, and policy audits are often presented as evidence of institutional responsiveness. Yet because these reforms are oriented toward preserving organizational stability, they tend to modify how departments document, narrate, and manage violence rather than redistributing power or constraining coercive authority (Thacher 2020). In this sense, risk management connects directly back to the danger imperative. When policing is institutionally organized around officer vulnerability, reforms are often designed to protect officers and departments from liability, uncertainty, or public criticism rather than to protect the public from police violence.

This literature reveals the disciplinary domain as the site where police power is actively reproduced through organizational routines, professional identity, and bureaucratic adaptation. Reform is not absent within this domain. It is strategically routed and administratively managed, allowing police institutions to absorb critique while remaining structurally intact (Kupferberg 2008; Thacher 2020). The case studies that follow show how these dynamics operate historically and organizationally within Prince George's County and Detroit, where changing structural conditions repeatedly generated reform pressures that departments translated into institutional continuity rather than transformation.

DISCIPLINARY POWER IN PRACTICE: COMPARATIVE CASE STUDIES

The case studies that follow examine how the disciplinary domain operates in practice by tracing the historical and organizational development of two police departments: the Prince George's County Police Department in Maryland and the Detroit Police Department in Michigan. The purpose of these cases is not to compare departments as contemporaneous organizational units, nor to determine which jurisdiction has been more or less successful at reform. Rather, they are used analytically to demonstrate how police organizations translate shifting structural conditions into stable disciplinary practices that preserve institutional authority. The analysis draws on historical records, policy histories, reform initiatives, and existing empirical research on policing in each jurisdiction.

As Chapter 1 demonstrated, the structural architecture of American policing has evolved across historical periods through changes in constitutional doctrine, civil rights law, federal oversight, and political economy. Reconstruction, Jim Crow, civil rights legislation, federal consent decrees, and contemporary reform initiatives have each altered the legal and political environment within which policing operates. Yet these transformations have not displaced policing's central role as a mechanism for managing racialized populations and maintaining social order. Instead, structural change has repeatedly authorized police institutions to pursue this function under new legal rationales and administrative forms.

Within this context, the disciplinary domain operates as the institutional bridge between structure and practice. Police departments translate evolving legal doctrines, funding streams, reform mandates, and political priorities into organizational routines that govern how coercive authority is exercised on the ground. These routines include training regimes, supervisory

oversight, disciplinary procedures, technological systems, and bureaucratic reporting structures that define what constitutes legitimate police behavior. Historical analysis of police departments therefore reveals not episodic failure or deviation, but patterned continuity. As the structural domain shifts, disciplinary institutions recalibrate their techniques while preserving the underlying project of racialized population management.

Prince George's County and Detroit provide two analytically useful cases through which this continuity becomes visible. The jurisdictions differ substantially in their political economies, demographic trajectories, and governance structures. Prince George's County is a suburban jurisdiction shaped by white flight, suburbanization, and the emergence of one of the wealthiest majority-Black counties in the United States. Detroit is an industrial city marked by labor migration, deindustrialization, municipal austerity, and prolonged federal oversight. These differences might suggest that policing would evolve along fundamentally distinct trajectories in the two jurisdictions.

Yet when examined historically, both departments demonstrate remarkably similar patterns of disciplinary adaptation. In Prince George's County, reforms associated with diversification, professionalization, and federal oversight altered the administrative appearance of policing without displacing the institutional practices through which coercive authority was exercised. In Detroit, consent decrees, technological modernization, and managerial reform initiatives reorganized policing through surveillance expansion and bureaucratic performance systems rather than reducing police discretion or violence. In both cases, reform pressures generated administrative adjustment rather than institutional transformation.

The cases therefore illustrate how the disciplinary domain sustains the structural organization of policing across changing political environments. Departments respond to

oversight not by relinquishing coercive authority but by developing new organizational techniques that render that authority administratively legible, professionally justified, and politically defensible. Training reforms, technological systems, compliance frameworks, and managerial oversight become mechanisms through which police organizations absorb critique while maintaining their core institutional function.

Examining the historical development of these departments thus reveals how disciplinary power operates through institutional continuity rather than rupture. Structural reforms may alter legal authority, political leadership, or funding structures, but police departments translate these changes into organizational routines that stabilize rather than disrupt coercive governance. The cases that follow demonstrate how police violence persists not simply because reform fails, but because reform is incorporated into the disciplinary mechanisms that make policing governable.

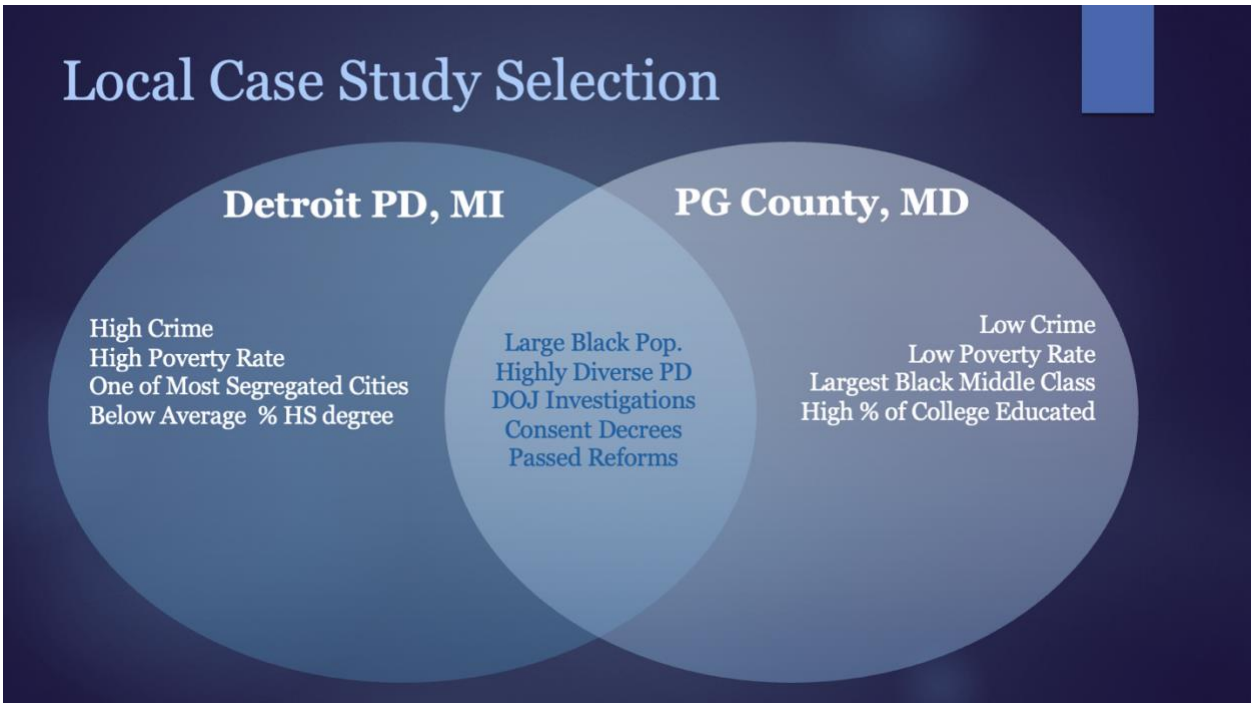


Figure 3. Case Comparison Detroit, MI vs. Prince George's County, MD

PRINCE GEORGE'S COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT, MD

The Prince George's County Police Department (PGPD) provides an important case for examining how the disciplinary domain translates structural protections of police power into organizational practice. Prince George's County is frequently cited as a model of police diversification. The department serves a majority-Black jurisdiction and maintains one of the most racially diverse police forces in the United States. These characteristics might suggest that demographic transformation and political incorporation would produce meaningful changes in policing practices. Yet the history of PGPD reveals a more complex pattern. Despite diversification initiatives, reform efforts, and periods of federal oversight, the department has repeatedly faced allegations of excessive force, racial discrimination, and organizational misconduct. The case therefore illustrates how police institutions absorb reform pressures while preserving the disciplinary structures that sustain coercive authority.

PGPD also illuminates how racialized labor hierarchies operate within police organizations themselves. Research on racialized organizations demonstrates that institutions reproduce inequality through internal rules, disciplinary procedures, and distributions of authority that appear formally race-neutral but generate uneven outcomes (Ray 2019). Police departments occupy a distinctive position within this framework because they function simultaneously as workplaces and enforcement institutions. Organizational policies governing promotion, discipline, and assignment shape not only how police exercise authority over communities but also how authority and vulnerability are distributed among officers. In Prince George's County, these dynamics became visible through lawsuits filed by officers of color alleging discriminatory discipline and unequal promotion opportunities. These internal conflicts

suggest that racialized hierarchies may persist even within departments that appear demographically representative. The department therefore provides a window into how policing reproduces racialized labor hierarchies both externally through enforcement and internally through organizational governance.

Situating PGPD within the theoretical framework developed in Chapter 1 clarifies how the disciplinary domain operationalizes the racialized labor hierarchy through institutional practice. Police departments organize and administer coercive power through bureaucratic routines that define professionalism, risk, and legitimacy. These routines shape which policing practices are rewarded, which harms are investigated, and which actors receive institutional protection. As a result, racialized inequality emerges both externally, through patterns of enforcement directed toward marginalized communities, and internally, through organizational processes that structure authority and discipline within the department itself.

Historical Foundations of Policing in Prince George's County

Prince George's County developed within a racialized political and economic system that shaped governance and policing long before the creation of a modern police department. During the colonial and early national periods, Maryland maintained one of the largest populations of free Black residents in the United States while simultaneously enacting restrictive legal regimes designed to regulate their movement and economic activity. Between 1795 and 1810, Maryland enacted a series of vagrancy and regulatory laws requiring free Black residents to obtain certificates of "good character" from local officials in order to sell goods or possess hunting equipment. Courts were also authorized to apprentice the children of "destitute or unfit" Black

parents to white households, effectively preserving racial labor hierarchies after the formal abolition of slavery (Ranney 2006).

Such laws operated alongside systems of direct surveillance and violence. Slave patrols developed across the southern colonies to prevent slave rebellions and control the movement of enslaved people. Patrols monitored the mobility of both enslaved and free Black residents, using violence and intimidation to enforce racial order (Fry 2001; Hadden 2003). Scholars note that these patrol systems became a "fundamental part of the evolving system of control of Blacks socially and economically," embedding coercive enforcement practices within local governance structures (Fry 2001:84). By the mid-eighteenth century, approximately forty percent of Maryland's population was Black, making racial control a central concern of colonial governance (Faragher 1990).

Racial violence further reinforced these systems of control. Lynchings occurred throughout the state during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, functioning as mechanisms of racial terror that maintained social hierarchy and economic domination. These practices were not merely expressions of individual prejudice but operated as tools of social regulation that reinforced racialized labor relations and property regimes associated with racial capitalism.

Prior to the establishment of a formal police department, law enforcement in Prince George's County was carried out by part-time deputy sheriffs and constables who exercised broad discretionary authority. The Prince George's County Police Department was formally established in 1927 to replace this decentralized system. The department now serves nearly 900,000 residents with more than 1,500 sworn officers, making it one of the largest law

enforcement agencies in the state of Maryland (Prince George's County Police Department 2024).

The creation of PGPD occurred during a period of intense racial and political mobilization in the United States. In 1925, more than 50,000 members of the Ku Klux Klan marched publicly through Washington, D.C., reflecting the resurgence of white supremacist movements during the early twentieth century. The Klan of this era presented its ideology as compatible with American civic identity, encouraging white Americans to view racial exclusion and intimidation as legitimate forms of social protection (Atlantic 2016). The institutionalization of modern policing in Prince George's County therefore occurred within a broader national environment in which racialized notions of order and citizenship were widely normalized.

Reform, Oversight, and Organizational Adaptation

Despite repeated reform efforts, the Prince George's County Police Department has long faced allegations of excessive force and discriminatory practices. In July 1999, the U.S. Department of Justice initiated an investigation into misconduct by the department's canine unit following eighteen civil rights lawsuits filed between 1993 and 1998 alleging unlawful dog attacks. The investigation expanded in October 2000 after federal investigators determined that misconduct extended beyond the canine program to broader allegations of excessive force.

In 2004, the department entered into a Memorandum of Agreement with the U.S. Department of Justice requiring reforms to use-of-force policies and canine deployment procedures. The agreement mandated revisions to training protocols, documentation requirements for force incidents, complaint investigation procedures, and supervisory review structures. An independent monitor was appointed to oversee compliance. Federal oversight

concluded in 2007 after a federal court determined that the department had satisfied the requirements of the consent decree.

However, the conclusion of federal oversight did not eliminate allegations of misconduct. Investigative reporting by the Washington Post found that Prince George's County officers were more likely than officers in any other major police department in the United States to discharge their firearms during encounters with civilians (Washington Post 2001). Subsequent incidents continued to generate public scrutiny. In 2012, the county paid a $3.6 million settlement to University of Maryland students who alleged wrongful arrest and physical assault by police officers (CBS Baltimore 2012). In 2015, a Prince George's County officer was convicted of threatening a civilian after pointing a firearm at the individual's head (NBC Washington 2015).

Recent investigations have also revealed significant racial tensions within the department itself. A 2018 report prepared for the ACLU of Maryland documented widespread allegations of discrimination against officers of color within the department. According to the report, Black and Latino officers were significantly more likely than white officers to face disciplinary charges, severe discipline, or termination. The report also documented racist communications among officers and the absence of meaningful disciplinary action in response to complaints of racial misconduct (Graham Report 2018).

These findings illustrate how disciplinary institutions can reproduce racialized hierarchies even within departments that have undergone substantial demographic diversification. Organizational policies governing internal discipline, promotion, and complaint investigation shape not only the distribution of authority within the department but also the patterns through which police power is exercised externally. As a result, internal organizational inequality and external patterns of policing often reinforce one another.

The history of PGPD therefore reflects a broader pattern within American policing. Reform initiatives frequently address procedural violations while leaving intact the organizational structures and disciplinary mechanisms that sustain institutional power. Policies are revised, training programs expanded, and oversight procedures implemented, yet the underlying allocation of coercive authority remains largely unchanged. Within the framework of the Matrix of Domination, these dynamics illustrate how the disciplinary domain translates structural protections of police power into institutional routines that stabilize racialized systems of governance.

Prince George's County illustrates how the disciplinary domain translates structural protections of police power into organizational practice. Despite diversification initiatives, federal oversight, and repeated reform efforts, the Prince George's County Police Department has continued to reproduce patterns of coercive authority and internal racialized hierarchy, suggesting that demographic change alone does not fundamentally alter the institutional logic of policing. Yet Prince George's County represents a distinctive context: a relatively affluent majority-Black jurisdiction with a racially diverse police force and substantial political incorporation. To examine whether these dynamics persist across different structural environments, the analysis now turns to the Detroit Police Department. Detroit developed within a markedly different political economy shaped by industrial decline, urban segregation, and fiscal crisis. Comparing these cases reveals how policing institutions adapt to distinct structural conditions while preserving the disciplinary practices that sustain racialized systems of governance.

DETROIT POLICE DEPARTMENT, MI

The Detroit Police Department (DPD) provides a second case through which to examine how the disciplinary domain translates structural conditions into institutional practice. Like Prince George's County, Detroit is frequently invoked in debates over whether demographic representation within policing institutions can produce meaningful reform. Detroit is a majority-Black city governed for decades by Black political leadership, including Black mayors, police chiefs, and city council members. The police department itself has also become majority Black over the past several decades. Yet despite these shifts in representation, Detroit has remained a central site of conflict over police violence, surveillance, and accountability.

This case study draws on multiple sources of evidence, including federal consent decree documents, municipal policing policy records, investigative journalism, crime statistics, and historical accounts of police–community conflict. Together these materials allow for an examination of how reform initiatives, administrative restructuring, and technological innovation have reshaped the institutional practices of the Detroit Police Department while leaving underlying disciplinary structures largely intact.

Detroit differs significantly from Prince George's County in its political economy. Once a major center of industrial production and labor migration, the city experienced profound economic restructuring during the late twentieth century as manufacturing jobs declined and population loss accelerated. Today Detroit has a population of roughly 650,000 residents, approximately eighty percent of whom are Black. Median incomes remain among the lowest of any major American city in the United States, reflecting decades of deindustrialization, suburbanization, and municipal fiscal crisis (U.S. Census Bureau 2022). These structural conditions have shaped the organization of policing in Detroit, where the police department

operates within a city confronting persistent economic inequality and elevated rates of violent crime.

Despite these structural pressures, Detroit's police force has undergone significant demographic change. By the early 2010s the department was majority Black, making it one of the largest Black-majority police departments in the United States (Detroit Police Department 2013). Yet demographic change has not eliminated internal organizational conflict. Lawsuits and internal disputes have continued to raise questions about promotion practices, disciplinary procedures, and organizational culture within the department. As in Prince George's County, these dynamics suggest that racialized organizational hierarchies can persist even within departments that appear demographically representative.

Historical Foundations of Policing in Detroit

Detroit's policing institutions developed within a history of racial conflict and urban transformation that long predates the contemporary department. The Detroit Police Department was formally established in 1865 following rapid population growth and political instability associated with the Civil War era (Detroit Police Department Historical Bureau 2015). The city had already experienced major racial unrest during the 1863 Detroit draft riots, when white mobs attacked Black residents in response to federal military conscription. Historians note that the violence reflected tensions surrounding labor competition, racial migration, and political change during the nineteenth century (Fine 2007).

Although Detroit appointed its first Black police officer in 1893, the department remained overwhelmingly white well into the mid-twentieth century. Archival records from Detroit's Board of Police Commissioners indicate that Black officers were frequently excluded

from patrol assignments in white neighborhoods and faced barriers to promotion within the department (Board of Police Commissioners Archives 1950–1965). These institutional practices reinforced racial segregation in policing even as Detroit's population became increasingly Black during the Great Migration.

Conflict between police and residents escalated dramatically during the twentieth century. One of the most controversial policing initiatives was the department's "Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets" unit, commonly known as STRESS, established in 1971 to combat street crime through undercover decoy operations. Historical analyses and investigative reporting document that the unit was responsible for more than twenty fatal shootings of civilians, the majority of whom were Black residents (Fine 2007; Thompson 2001).Public protest against the unit became a major issue in Detroit politics and contributed to its abolition in 1974.

Earlier confrontations had already revealed deep tensions between the police department and Detroit's Black communities. In July 1967, a police raid on an after-hours bar triggered one of the most significant urban uprisings in American history. The resulting rebellion lasted five days and left forty-three people dead and more than one thousand injured. The National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders later concluded that systemic racism within policing and other public institutions had played a central role in producing the unrest (Kerner Commission 1968).

These historical episodes demonstrate how Detroit's policing institutions developed within a context shaped by racial segregation, industrial restructuring, and repeated confrontations between police authority and Black residents. While the city's demographic composition changed significantly during the late twentieth century, many of the institutional

practices associated with aggressive enforcement and community mistrust remained embedded within the department.

Reform, Oversight, and Organizational Adaptation

Like Prince George's County, Detroit's police department has undergone multiple waves of reform driven by federal oversight and civil rights litigation. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the U.S. Department of Justice launched an investigation into the Detroit Police Department following numerous allegations of excessive force, illegal detention, and unconstitutional searches. The investigation drew attention to several high-profile incidents, including the 2000 police shooting of Errol Shaw Sr., a deaf man who was killed by officers after failing to respond to verbal commands (U.S. Department of Justice 2003).

Following the investigation, Detroit entered into two federal consent decrees in 2003 addressing use-of-force practices and conditions of detention within police holding facilities. The decrees required substantial reforms to departmental policies, including new reporting requirements for use-of-force incidents, enhanced supervisory review procedures, improved training protocols, and expanded internal accountability mechanisms (U.S. Department of Justice 2003).

Federal monitoring continued for more than a decade before the court formally terminated oversight in 2014 after determining that the department had achieved compliance with the required reforms (United States District Court 2014). However, subsequent investigations and civil lawsuits continued to raise concerns about excessive force and police misconduct within the department. Scholars and civil rights advocates have argued that while the

consent decrees produced important administrative reforms, they did not fundamentally transform the internal organizational culture of the department (Weitzer 2015).

Detroit's municipal bankruptcy in 2013 further reshaped the institutional environment in which policing operated. Fiscal restructuring altered several municipal governance institutions and temporarily weakened oversight mechanisms, including the authority of the Detroit Board of Police Commissioners (Detroit Charter Revision Commission 2015). Although the board's authority was later restored, the bankruptcy period demonstrated how broader structural crises could reshape accountability systems governing police institutions.

Project Green Light and the Technocratic Expansion of Discipline

In the years following Detroit's bankruptcy, city leaders pursued technological approaches to policing that emphasized surveillance, data integration, and real-time monitoring. One of the most prominent initiatives was Project Green Light, launched in 2016 by Mayor Mike Duggan and Police Chief James Craig. The program connected high-definition surveillance cameras from private businesses—including gas stations, apartment complexes, and retail establishments—to the Detroit Police Department's Real-Time Crime Center.

Participating businesses were required to install department-approved camera systems and maintain enhanced lighting conditions in exchange for direct connection to the police monitoring network and priority response from nearby patrol units. Municipal records indicate that the program expanded rapidly after its initial launch, eventually connecting hundreds of businesses across the city (Detroit Police Department 2020).

City officials framed Project Green Light as a model of technologically advanced policing capable of reducing violent crime through enhanced visibility and faster response times.

However, civil liberties organizations and independent researchers raised concerns about the program's expansion of surveillance infrastructure and its reliance on public–private partnerships. Critics noted that participating businesses were required to pay installation and service fees, effectively allowing commercial establishments to purchase enhanced police attention (ACLU of Michigan 2019).

Civil rights organizations also criticized the program's integration of facial recognition software and automated license plate readers. Because many Green Light locations were concentrated in predominantly Black neighborhoods, the system intensified surveillance in communities already subject to intensive policing (Garvie, Bedoya, and Frankle 2016). Investigative journalism and independent analysis further questioned the program's effectiveness. While Detroit officials attributed reductions in violent crime to the Green Light initiative, researchers noted that the city had not produced independent evaluations demonstrating a causal relationship between surveillance expansion and crime reduction (Detroit Free Press 2020).

Project Green Light therefore illustrates how the disciplinary domain adapts to changing structural conditions. Rather than relying solely on traditional patrol strategies, the Detroit Police Department expanded its capacity for monitoring and intervention through technological infrastructure and partnerships with private businesses. These innovations were framed as modernization and efficiency, yet they also reinforced existing patterns of surveillance and control.

FROM INSTITUTIONAL STRUCTURE TO NARRATIVE POWER

Together, Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate that the persistence of police power cannot be understood through isolated policy failures or episodic misconduct. The structural domain establishes the legal and institutional foundations that insulate policing through federalism, constitutional doctrine, and fragmented accountability. The disciplinary domain translates these protections into organizational practice through bureaucratic routines, training regimes, internal discipline, and enforcement priorities. As the cases of Prince George's County and Detroit illustrate, police institutions adapt to shifting political, economic, and demographic conditions while maintaining the underlying logics of coercive authority. Structural protections enable discretionary enforcement, while disciplinary systems normalize and administer that authority through everyday institutional practice. Together, these domains stabilize policing as a durable mechanism of social order, even as reforms periodically alter its formal rules and procedures.

Yet structural and disciplinary processes alone cannot fully explain why police power remains broadly legitimate despite persistent patterns of violence and inequality. The durability of policing also depends on the production of meaning: the narratives, moral vocabularies, and emotional frameworks through which different actors interpret safety, crime, and authority. These processes operate within what Patricia Hill Collins describes as the hegemonic domain, where institutions shape common sense understandings of social order and justice. Unlike the structural and disciplinary domains, which can be examined through law, policy, and organizational practice, hegemonic power is less directly observable and therefore more difficult to measure. The following chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine this domain empirically through in-depth interviews with stakeholders across community, policy, and law enforcement roles. By analyzing how narratives and emotional orientations toward policing

are constructed and contested, the chapters that follow explore how hegemonic processes both reflect and reproduce the structural and disciplinary dynamics examined thus far.

CHAPTER 3:

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

Accessing the Hegemonic and Interpersonal Domains

This study employs a qualitative, comparative interview-based research design to examine how police power is narrated, justified, and emotionally experienced across institutional contexts. Drawing on 65 semi-structured interviews with 66 participants across eight U.S. cities, the analysis focuses on how actors positioned differently within policing governance—law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders—interpret and contest the legitimacy of policing institutions. This design allows the study to examine how meaning, legitimacy, and emotional responses to policing are produced relationally across institutional roles rather than within any single organizational setting.

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to examine how police power is sustained not only through law and bureaucracy, but also through meaning, emotion, and relational practice. The analytic aim is not to adjudicate the moral validity of competing claims about policing, but to examine how institutional actors produce, circulate, and stabilize legitimacy through narrative and affect under conditions of contestation. While the structural and disciplinary domains of power are accessible through formal records, policies, and organizational procedures, the hegemonic and interpersonal domains operate through language, narrative coherence, and affective alignment. Making these domains empirically legible therefore requires methods capable of capturing how legitimacy, consent, and harm are narrated, felt, and normalized in everyday discourse.

To access these domains, this dissertation employs a qualitative, comparative interview-based design centered on in-depth, semi-structured interviews with stakeholders positioned

differently in relation to policing. Unlike the historical case studies in Chapter 2, which examine police departments as organizational and institutional formations over time, the analytic focus here is not on departments as bounded cases. Instead, the primary units of analysis are stakeholder narratives and affective grammars, examined comparatively across cities and institutional roles to understand how hegemonic meaning and interpersonal power are produced, contested, and stabilized.

This approach treats interviews not as repositories of individual opinion but as sites where power is actively articulated and reproduced. Drawing on constructivist and interpretive traditions, narratives and affect are understood as analytically generative rather than merely reflective of material conditions (Charmaz 2014; Priya 2020). Narrative analysis provides a methodological lens for observing how legality, authority, responsibility, and deservingness become ordinary through the stories actors tell about institutions, reform, and violence (Ewick and Silbey 1998). This approach is particularly well suited to examining the hegemonic domain, where consent is cultivated less through formal rule than through shared vocabularies, moral reasoning, and emotional resonance. The Matrix of Domination offers an integrative analytic framework for this approach, as interviews reveal how structural and disciplinary arrangements are interpreted, justified, and lived through hegemonic meaning and interpersonal affect (Collins 2000; Collins and Bilge 2016).

The methods detailed in this chapter are guided by two core premises. First, power operates relationally: it is produced through interaction among actors situated within distinct institutional, moral, and emotional worlds (Emirbayer 1997; Collins 2000). Second, consent is not simply expressed through stated beliefs but cultivated through narrative coherence and affective alignment (Gramsci 1971; Ahmed 2004). Accordingly, this chapter pairs comparative

narrative analysis with affective analysis to capture both what stakeholders say and how they say it, attending to the emotional grammars that organize trust, threat, legitimacy, and harm.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I first describe the broader Russell Sage Foundation–funded project from which the qualitative data were drawn and detail the interview sample, recruitment strategies, and interview protocol. I then outline the analytic framework, including stakeholder groupings and a priori codes derived from theory and existing literature. The final sections describe the narrative and affective analytic strategies used to examine how shared vocabularies acquire divergent meanings across stakeholder groups and how affective misalignment structures interpersonal encounters. By foregrounding narrative and affect as methodological entry points, this chapter establishes how the hegemonic and interpersonal domains are rendered empirically legible. This study does not aim to estimate prevalence, predict outcomes, or establish causal effects. Instead, it examines individual accounts and seeks interpretive clarity about how meaning, legitimacy, and consent are produced, negotiated, and stabilized under conditions of unequal power (Collins 2000).

DATA COLLECTION: THE RUSSELL SAGE FOUNDATION PROJECT

The data analyzed in this dissertation were collected as part of a Russell Sage Foundation–funded project titled *"Protest, Policy, and Racial Justice: The Impact of Black Lives Matter on Policing Reforms.*

Interview Sample

Between 2022 and 2023, I conducted 65 semi-structured interviews with 66 participants across eight major U.S. cities: Baltimore, Detroit, Houston, Kansas City, Nashville, Phoenix, Raleigh, and St. Louis. One interview was conducted jointly with two participants who requested to be interviewed together. Participants also included individuals with direct institutional ties to Ferguson, Missouri and Prince George's County, Maryland due to their involvement in

nationally prominent policing debates. The geographic distribution of participants is presented below.

Table 3.1 Interview Sample by City

City	N
Baltimore, MD	9
Detroit, MI	8
Houston, TX	9
Kansas City, MO	8
Nashville, TN	9
Phoenix, AZ	8
Raleigh, NC	9
St. Louis, MO	8
Ferguson, MO*	1
Prince George's County, MD*	1
Total	**65**

*Note: One interview was conducted with a former chief connected to Ferguson, Missouri and one interview with a participant connected to Prince George's County, Maryland due to their central role in national policing debates.

Participants were selected to capture a range of institutional perspectives involved in policing governance, enforcement, and reform advocacy. Stakeholder groups included law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community-based actors engaged in organizing, advocacy, research, or legal work related to policing. Table 3.2 provides a detailed breakdown of participants by institutional role and stakeholder category (See also Appendix B).

The law enforcement sample includes participants across multiple ranks and organizational positions, including patrol officers, supervisors, command staff, commissioners, and chiefs of police. The policymaker sample includes state legislators, mayors, prosecutors, judges, and legislative or municipal staff involved in policing policy. Community stakeholders include activists, nonprofit leaders, clergy, violence interruption practitioners, and subject experts such as scholars, journalists, and legal professionals who regularly engage with policing policy debates.

Table 3.2 Interview Sample by Stakeholder Role and Institutional Position

Stakeholder Category	Institutional Position	N
Law Enforcement		
	Chiefs of Police	3
	Police Commissioner / Deputy Commissioner	2
	Command Staff (Major / Commander / Captain)	4
	Supervisors (Sergeant / Lieutenant)	3
	Patrol Officers	2
	Community Oversight Board Member	1
	Retired from Law Enforcement	4
	Former Officers	2
		21
Policymakers		
	State Legislators	2
	Mayors	2
	Local Elected Officials	6
	Prosecutor	1
	Judge	1
	Legislative or Municipal Staff	2
		14
Community Stakeholders		
	Activists / Grassroots Organizers	8
	Victims / Family Members of Victims	3
	Violence Interrupters	1
	Nonprofit Leaders (Local Organizations)	8
	Nonprofit Leaders (National Organizations)	2
	Clergy	2
	Subject Experts (Scholars, Journalists, Legal Expert	7
		31
Total Participants		**66**

*Command staff includes positions such as major, commander, and captain. Subject experts include scholars, journalists, and legal professionals engaged in policing or criminal justice policy.

While participant selection prioritized positional diversity rather than demographic representativeness, demographic characteristics including race, gender, age, and educational background were recorded and considered during analysis when they intersected with

institutional positioning or shaped how participants described their experiences with policing. Demographic characteristics of the sample are summarized below.

Table 3.3 Interview sample by Race

Race	N	Percent
Black	47	71%
White	13	20%
Latinx	2	3%
Multiracial	2	3%
Indigenous	1	2%
Asian / Pacific Islander	1	2%
Total Participants	**66**	**100%**

*Note: Racial identity reflects participant self-identification. "Multiracial" includes participants who reported more than one racial identity. Percentages may not sum exactly to 100 due to rounding.

The racial composition of the interview sample reflects both the recruitment strategy and the empirical terrain of contemporary policing reform debates. A majority of participants identified as Black. This distribution emerged through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling, which prioritized individuals directly engaged in policing governance, reform advocacy, and community organizing. In many of the cities included in this study, Black leaders, clergy, organizers, and public officials have played a central role in shaping debates surrounding police accountability, protest, and reform.

As recruitment proceeded through professional and movement networks, referrals often circulated within these existing leadership and advocacy communities, producing a sample that reflects the racialized structure of contemporary reform coalitions. Rather than treating this distribution as a limitation, it provides insight into the actors most directly engaged in contesting and negotiating the legitimacy of policing institutions. At the same time, the sample includes participants across multiple racial backgrounds and institutional roles, allowing for comparative

analysis of how narratives of safety, legitimacy, and reform are articulated across stakeholder groups. Additional demographic information is below.

Table 3.4 Interview Participants by Gender ID

Gender	N	Percent
Men	38	58%
Women	26	39%
Transgender / Nonbinary	2	3%
Total Participants	**66**	**100%**

*Note: Gender identity reflects participant self-identification. To protect participant anonymity, transgender and nonbinary identities are reported in aggregate.

Table 3.5 Interview Participants by Age

Age Range	N	Percent
20–29	1	2%
30–39	9	14%
40–49	17	26%
50–59	22	33%
60–69	14	21%
70+	3	5%
Total Participants	**66**	**100%**

*The majority of participants were between the ages of 40 and 60, reflecting the professional experience typically associated with leadership roles in policing, policymaking, and community advocacy.

Table 3.6 Educational Attainment of Interview Participants

Education Level	N
High School (HS)	9
Bachelor's Degree (BA)	21
Master's Degree (MA)	19
Juris Doctor (JD)	10
Doctorate (PhD)	7
Total Participants	**66**

*Educational attainment reflects the highest degree reported by participants at the time of the interview.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a combination of organizational outreach, professional networks, and snowball sampling. Law enforcement agencies in each city were contacted and invited to participate, while community organizations and civic leaders were identified through research on each city's history of policing, protest activity, and reform initiatives. In some cases, organizations were contacted without a specific individual in mind, while in others public officials, nonprofit leaders, or recognized community figures were approached directly.

Given the politically sensitive nature of the topic, establishing trust and rapport was essential. Interviews typically began with open-ended questions about participants' professional roles and experiences before turning to policing reform debates (See Appendix A). This conversational structure allowed participants to situate their responses within their own institutional and personal contexts, encouraging candid reflection while reducing adversarial framing.

Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was conducted via Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed with approximately 99 percent accuracy using Rev.com transcription services. Participants received a $50 honorarium. All procedures were reviewed and approved by the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board (IRB). After transcripts were verified, audio recordings were deleted in accordance with IRB data management protocols. Participant names used throughout the dissertation are pseudonyms, and identifying details have been removed or modified to protect confidentiality. Organizational affiliations are described at a level sufficient to contextualize participants' perspectives while minimizing the risk of identification.

Stakeholder Groups and A Priori Codes

Because this project examines power as relational rather than purely demographic, stakeholder grouping followed institutional position rather than identity categories. Participants were grouped into three primary analytic categories (see Table 3.2):

1. Law Enforcement
2. Policymakers
3. Community Stakeholders

These categories capture the distinct institutional roles through which policing is governed, enacted, and contested. This grouping strategy reflects the relational logic of the Matrix of Domination by capturing how actors positioned differently within institutional hierarchies narrate and interpret the legitimacy of policing.

A priori codes were developed based on both theoretical frameworks and prior literature on policing and legitimacy. Initial codes included: Accountability, Reform, Respect, Trust, Empathy, Fairness, Safety, Danger, Legitimacy, Dehumanization, Resistance, Support, Media and several more (See Appendix D).

For analytic clarity, several key concepts were operationalized as follows:

- **Accountability** refers to mechanisms through which police actions are investigated, reviewed, or sanctioned.
- **Legitimacy** refers to perceptions that police authority is justified and deserving of compliance.
- **Safety** refers to conditions under which individuals feel protected from harm.
- **Danger** refers to perceived threats requiring police intervention.

- **Dehumanization** refers to language or narratives that deny the dignity or moral worth of individuals or groups.

These codes served as scaffolding for inductive coding as additional themes emerged during analysis.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO CAPTURING THE HEGEMONIC DOMAIN

Empirically capturing the hegemonic domain presents distinct methodological challenges. Unlike the structural or disciplinary domains, where power is visible through policies, budgets, and bureaucratic procedures, the hegemonic domain operates through language, meaning, and affect. Although traces of hegemonic assumptions may appear in written policies or institutional documents, its primary operation occurs through everyday discourse, moral reasoning, and emotional alignment. It is both pervasive and diffuse—embedded in everyday language, normalized through repetition, and sustained through emotional resonance rather than formal authority.

Traditional administrative indicators such as arrest statistics, budgets, or disciplinary records cannot adequately measure belief, legitimacy, or consent because these phenomena are culturally produced and relationally sustained rather than administratively recorded. Likewise, conventional survey approaches often capture stated attitudes without revealing the narrative structures through which actors justify or contest institutional authority.

The interviews that ground this dissertation nonetheless provide a rare empirical window into this terrain. Because law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders speak from distinct yet overlapping institutional worlds, their narratives illuminate the discursive architecture through which power becomes sensible and legitimate. By examining how shared

terms acquire divergent meanings across stakeholder groups, the data render the hegemonic domain empirically legible.

To analyze these narratives, I conducted a comparative narrative analysis across stakeholder groups, treating language not merely as description but as a site where power and legitimacy are actively reproduced. Interview transcripts were coded iteratively for recurrent terms central to policing discourse, including safety, accountability, community, trust, respect, reform, and danger.

Analytic rigor was strengthened through iterative memo writing, constant comparison across interviews and stakeholder groups, and sustained attention to negative cases that challenged emerging interpretations (Charmaz 2014; Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011; Saldaña 2021). Conceptual categories were refined through repeated engagement with the data to ensure that analytic claims remained grounded in participants' language. Throughout the analytic process, theoretical concepts guided interpretation while remaining open to revision through sustained engagement with the empirical material (See Appendix C).

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis examines how stakeholders construct, justify, and contest meaning through story. Interview transcripts were analyzed as narratives rather than isolated statements, treating each account as an effort to define what policing is, what it should be, and what counts as legitimate harm and legitimate authority.

Analysis proceeded in several stages. First, open, line-by-line coding identified recurring narrative frames, including:

- "Good cops" versus "bad apples"

- Isolated incidents versus systemic failure
- Danger and sacrifice
- Procedural fairness
- Political constraints
- Media bias

Second, axial coding organized these frames into broader narrative families capturing how stakeholders structured moral meaning.

Third, each narrative family was mapped according to four analytic elements:

1. Problem definition
2. Causal attribution
3. Moral evaluation
4. Preferred remedy

Comparing these narrative structures across stakeholder groups revealed how shared vocabulary often concealed divergent moral logics.

Affective Analysis

While narrative analysis centers meaning, affective analysis centers the emotional registers through which participants experience and communicate power. Drawing on Arlie Hochschild's theory of feeling rules (1983) and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective economies (2004), this analysis treats emotion as a mechanism through which legitimacy, threat, and harm become socially intelligible. Work by Patricia Clough (2007) further informs this approach by conceptualizing affect as circulating within broader social fields rather than residing solely within individual experience.

To capture these dynamics, I returned to interview audio for a purposive subset of transcripts sampled across stakeholder groups and cities. Audio analysis enabled attention to affective cues often flattened in text, including tone, cadence, pauses, laughter, irritation, resignation, grief, and moral certainty[18]. Analysis proceeded through several stages (See Appendix C). First, affect-focused analytic memos were produced for each interview documenting dominant emotional postures (Saldaña 2021). Second, affective codes were developed to capture recurring emotional orientations, including:

- fear and threat
- anger and resent
- grief and despair
- care and protection
- humiliation and disrespect
- moral injury[19]
- guilt
- exhaustion
- compassion
- defensiveness

These emotional patterns were then compared across stakeholder groups to identify **affective misalignment**. Affective misalignment refers to patterned differences in how actors emotionally interpret the same event, institution, or interaction, reflecting divergent moral frameworks, institutional positions, and experiences of harm (Ahmed 2004; Clough 2007;

[18] Moral certainty was expressed through emphatic tone, repetition of categorical claims, dismissal of counterarguments, and framing particular interpretations as self-evident or common sense.

[19] Moral injury refers to the psychological and emotional harm experienced when individuals believe they have violated deeply held moral beliefs or witnessed actions that transgress those values (Litz et al. 2009).

Hochschild 1983). This final stage focused on whose suffering was recognized as legitimate, which harms were foregrounded or minimized, and how responsibility for those harms was emotionally framed. Comparing these emotional grammars across law enforcement, policymakers, and community stakeholders made it possible to identify where participants appeared to share concern and where they differed systematically in what they felt, feared, defended, or mourned. In this way, affective analysis provided a methodological entry point into the interpersonal domain by revealing how power is lived, justified, and contested through emotion.

Acknowledgment of Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the interview sample was not designed to be statistically representative, and findings should therefore be interpreted as interpretive insights rather than population estimates. Second, recruitment relied partly on professional and advocacy networks, which may have shaped the composition of the sample. Third, interviews capture participants' accounts and interpretations of policing rather than direct observations of institutional behavior. Fourth, because the study focuses on actors engaged in policing governance, reform advocacy, or enforcement, perspectives of individuals more distant from these institutional debates may be underrepresented. Finally, only one prosecutor was included in the interview sample. The inclusion of this perspective remains analytically useful for identifying how prosecutorial authority enters the broader matrix of policing governance. Future research would benefit from greater prosecutorial diversity in order to assess more fully how prosecutorial actors reproduce or disrupt police power.

CHAPTER 4:

THE FRACTURED LEXICON OF FALSE CONSENSUS

The Hegemonic Domain

The hegemonic domain is the arena in which collective meaning is produced, circulated, and stabilized. It is where institutions, publics, and political actors struggle over what events mean, what counts as harm, and which responses appear reasonable. In debates over policing, this domain matters because police power is sustained not only through law, force, and bureaucracy, but also through language. Public controversy does not unfold on neutral terrain. It unfolds within a field of interpretation shaped by institutional interests, professional norms, media infrastructures, and unequal proximity to the consequences of state power.

Yet under contemporary conditions of narrative saturation and fragmented information environments, shared vocabulary no longer guarantees shared understanding. Terms such as reform, accountability, safety, and respect circulate widely in public debates over policing. They appear to signal broad moral agreement. They sound legible across institutions. They often seem to offer common ground. But the interviews analyzed in this chapter show that these terms do not carry stable meanings across stakeholder groups. Instead, their content shifts depending on institutional location, professional incentives, and lived relationship to police power. Across stakeholder groups, these narratives consistently position certain communities as sites of disorder requiring management rather than as communities requiring investment. In doing so, they implicitly align policing with the regulation of economically marginalized populations, extending the historical role of policing in maintaining a racialized labor hierarchy into contemporary discourse. Actors often use the same words while describing fundamentally different realities.

This chapter argues that contemporary policing debates are organized by what I call a fractured lexicon: a shared political vocabulary whose meanings diverge across institutional positions. Law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders repeatedly invoke the same moral language, but they attach different expectations to what that language requires in practice. This is not simply semantic variation. It is a pattern through which power is organized in the hegemonic domain. Shared language creates the appearance of alignment while concealing disagreement over responsibility, harm, authority, and change.

Treating language as a mechanism of power rather than a neutral medium of communication, this chapter builds on Gramsci's insight that hegemony is secured not through coercion alone but through the normalization of particular ways of seeing and naming the world. "Common sense" does not emerge as a coherent philosophy. It is produced through repeated assumptions, institutional routines, and everyday interpretations that make existing arrangements seem natural, necessary, and difficult to contest (Gramsci 1971). Stuart Hall and colleagues extend this insight by showing how race becomes central to hegemonic projects, especially during moments of crisis. Law-and-order discourse links crime, race, and disorder into moral narratives that justify expanded state authority while presenting that authority as reasonable and protective (Hall et al. 1978). In the context of policing, hegemonic stability depends in part on language that appears universally meaningful even as it conceals deep asymmetries in authority, vulnerability, and consequence.

Drawing on comparative narrative analysis of interviews with law enforcement officials, policymakers, and community stakeholders across multiple cities, this chapter shows that debates over policing do not stall simply because actors disagree on values. More often, they use the same moral vocabulary to describe incompatible social realities. Terms such as reform,

accountability, and respect appear to signify consensus while functioning instead as sites of divergence, shaped by institutional role and by differential exposure to police power (Collins 2000; Clair 2020). The result is a form of false consensus in which shared language absorbs critique without resolving conflict.

The chapter proceeds in four parts. First, it situates the analysis within scholarship on police reform discourse, political communication, and narrative fragmentation. Second, it develops the concept of the fractured lexicon and shows how shared language masks deep disagreement across stakeholder groups. Third, it analyzes how three key terms, reform, accountability, and respect, are interpreted differently by policymakers, law enforcement officials, and community stakeholders. Finally, it examines how this fragmentation contributes to false consensus, weakens coalition building, and stabilizes police power within the hegemonic domain.

NARRATIVE INFRASTRUCTURE AND FRAGMENTED MEANING

Scholarship on police reform has long identified a persistent gap between widespread demands for change and the remarkable durability of policing institutions. Reform efforts often respond to crisis through procedural or technocratic interventions: expanded training, body-worn cameras, civilian review boards, transparency mandates, revised use-of-force policies, and new reporting requirements. These reforms can alter administrative routines, but they often leave the underlying distribution of authority intact (Kupferberg 2008; Alpert, McLean, and Wolfe 2017; Goh 2020). The result is a familiar cycle in which public outrage generates reform proposals, reform signals institutional responsiveness, and yet core relations of power remain largely unchanged.

At the same time, research on political communication shows that publics now interpret controversy within fragmented information environments shaped by partisan media systems, algorithmic sorting, declining trust in institutions, and increasingly individualized patterns of media consumption (Tsfati and Cappella 2005; Prior 2007; Stroud 2011; Bail et al. 2018). These shifts matter for the hegemonic domain because they alter the conditions under which shared meaning is produced. People may still encounter the same words, but not through the same interpretive frameworks. Shared vocabulary persists while interpretive ground thins.

Over the past several decades, the informational and cultural environments through which people encounter political language have expanded and fractured dramatically. The rise of cable news, digital journalism, social media platforms, and online commentary has multiplied the number of sources through which events are narrated. Patterns of exposure are increasingly segmented by ideology, race, class, gender, age, and platform use. At the same time, the volume of mediated content has intensified. People move through dense streams of news, commentary, entertainment, and algorithmically recommended media, often with fewer shared cultural reference points than in earlier periods (Lotz 2017; Alter 2017; Lizardo and Skiles 2016; Noble 2018). Educational inequality and unequal curricular exposure further shape how publics encounter public debate, what historical frameworks they possess, and which narratives feel plausible or authoritative (Reardon 2011; Anyon 2014).

These developments contribute to a weakening of shared interpretive ground. Hegemony cannot be measured directly, and this study does not claim to measure media exposure or algorithmic influence at the individual level. Still, the interview narratives analyzed here are consistent with a broader environment in which common vocabulary remains available while common meaning becomes less stable. From a Gramscian perspective, this matters because

hegemonic common sense depends on some degree of overlap in the social environments through which people interpret political language. When that overlap erodes, words may continue to circulate widely even as their meanings diverge sharply across audiences.

The hegemonic domain therefore operates not only through the content of narratives but through the infrastructures that circulate them. In a fragmented media environment, political language can function as an unstable signifier. It travels across institutions and publics while carrying different meanings in different contexts. Words that sound consensual can conceal deep disagreement. Hegemonic power under these conditions may depend less on producing genuine unity than on maintaining a flexible vocabulary broad enough to absorb competing interpretations without forcing resolution.

Police institutions are especially active participants in shaping this terrain. Tony Cheng (2020) describes the "policing machine" as the network of public information officers, media relationships, communication strategies, and digital messaging practices through which police departments manage public narratives about crime, safety, legitimacy, and professional service. Through press releases, social media posts, official statements, and selective framing of incidents, departments influence how events are interpreted and what kinds of police action appear necessary or justified. These communication practices do not operate in isolation. They exist alongside similar forms of narrative management used by political institutions, corporations, advocacy organizations, and media actors. The result is a crowded discursive environment in which multiple institutions compete to define the same event.

Under such conditions, people often stabilize meaning by defaulting to interpretive frameworks associated with institutional role and lived experience. Policymakers approach police controversy through governance, administration, legal authority, and political feasibility.

Law enforcement officials interpret it through operational risk, organizational legitimacy, and professional norms. Community stakeholders often anchor their narratives in lived experience, accumulated harm, racial inequality, and patterns of misrecognition. These are not simply different opinions. They are patterned ways of making sense of the same political terrain.

This dynamic helps explain why calls for reform can appear broadly supported while producing limited convergence. Participants may all endorse reform, accountability, and safety. Yet they often mean different things by those terms. Shared language creates the appearance of common purpose while masking disagreement about what change should look like, who should hold power, and what justice requires. The fractured lexicon is one of the mechanisms through which the hegemonic domain absorbs critique without yielding unified demands capable of redistributing power or destabilizing institutional authority.

A Tale of Two Chiefs

The fractured lexicon is visible not only across stakeholder groups but also within them. Two police chiefs, both Black women, led the same city's police department at different times during the protest cycle following George Floyd's murder. Each offered an account of tear gas deployment during protest, but their narratives diverged sharply in how they interpreted the event, assigned responsibility, and described the legitimacy of police action.

The first chief, Chief Bumpers, treated the use of tear gas as a serious institutional failure. Reflecting on the event, she explained:

> "The officers deployed gas on a group that should not have received any gas. They were protesting but they weren't violent. They weren't anything. They deployed gas and they shouldn't have."

She described it as “a bad experience” that required policy revision, body-worn camera review, and discipline for officers who violated departmental standards. In her account, the police were in the wrong. Protesters were not framed as the central problem. The event revealed misconduct or poor judgment on the part of officers, and it demanded accountability. Her narrative still remained institutionally bounded, since the solution was internal reform rather than structural rupture, but it clearly located fault with police action.

The second chief, Chief Anderson who led that same city’s department at a different time, narrated a similar kind of protest crisis through a different moral lens. She acknowledged that some people “should not have received any gas,” but her broader account cast the situation as one of disorder, volatility, and unfair scrutiny of police.

> *“But in 2020, the majority of the protests were peaceful, but we did have some that became riots. And we had to deploy gas munitions, which ended up being an awful idea because of the way it was deployed. So again, that was a bad experience, but learn from it, moving forward, and made a lot of policy revisions as a result of it.”*

Protesters were described in ways that edged toward riot, and officers were portrayed as responding under difficult conditions while being judged harshly by publics who did not understand the operational pressures involved. Reform in her framing was incremental and managerial. It might involve revising language in policy, clarifying procedure, or documenting existing practices that already aligned with national reform expectations. In this account, police were not the primary wrongdoers. Protesters were problematically framed as disorderly, and officers were presented as unfairly criticized.

The contrast clarifies how similar institutional positions can produce sharply different interpretations of responsibility and harm. They were chiefs of the same city at different times,

interpreting similar protest-related force through sharply different narratives. One framed the protesters as largely innocent and the police as deserving punishment. The other portrayed protesters as closer to rioters and police as unfairly scrutinized by the public. The difference is not reducible to race, gender, or formal rank. Both women occupied a similar structural location in the institutional hierarchy. Yet they produced distinct interpretations of responsibility and harm.

Although both chiefs describe the same protest event and the same use of force, their interpretations diverge sharply. One frames the protest as a riot and the deployment of gas as a tactical misstep, while the other describes the protesters as nonviolent and the use of gas as unjustified harm requiring accountability. Yet despite these differences, both narratives remain within the bounds of institutional legitimacy, illustrating how disagreement is contained rather than destabilizing.

At the same time, their disagreement remained bounded by a common institutional rationality. In both narratives, the legitimacy of the institution itself remained intact. The issue was how to manage crisis, assign fault, and preserve organizational credibility. Even the more critical account did not reject policing as a legitimate institution. It sought to correct failure from within. This is precisely what makes the example useful. Narrative disagreement does not necessarily destabilize hegemonic authority. It can widen interpretive space while preserving the core legitimacy of the institution. The hegemonic domain does not require total narrative uniformity. It requires that disagreement remain contained within frameworks that preserve policing as necessary, governable, and reformable.

Institutional Position and Narrative Production

Institutional position strongly shapes how actors define harm, legitimacy, responsibility, and reform. Policymakers, whose labor centers on legislation, administration, and governance, tend to frame policing debates through procedural and technocratic language. Law enforcement officials, whose work involves managing risk and maintaining order, emphasize operational realities, internal standards, and the practical demands of police work. Community stakeholders, who most directly experience the consequences of policing, often ground their narratives in lived experience, structural inequality, and moral recognition.

These orientations are not merely expressions of personal preference. They reflect institutional logics embedded in organizational roles. People positioned differently within structures of governance, enforcement, and exposure to state power occupy different social locations. They encounter different constraints, responsibilities, forms of risk, and forms of accountability. Those locations shape what counts as a problem, what feels urgent, and which responses appear reasonable.

Intersectional scholarship has long shown that systems of power distribute authority and vulnerability unevenly across social positions (Crenshaw 1991; Collins 2000; Choo and Ferree 2010). Within policing, institutional role structures how actors meet the state. Policymakers govern institutions and write or interpret rules. Law enforcement officials enact authority through everyday disciplinary practice. Community stakeholders often encounter policing through surveillance, suspicion, criminalization, and violence. Because these experiences are not equivalent, the narratives built from them are not equivalent either.

For policymakers, controversy around policing often appears as a problem of governance. Reform becomes a question of legislative design, administrative feasibility, jurisdictional authority, and institutional implementation. For law enforcement officials, the same controversy

is filtered through professional frameworks that prioritize operational legitimacy, uncertainty, officer safety, and organizational stability. Community stakeholders frequently understand those same events through the cumulative experience of surveillance, disrespect, force, exclusion, and repeated institutional disregard.

Importantly, these narrative patterns do not map neatly onto demographic identity alone. Many participants were themselves members of historically marginalized groups. Yet institutional role often structured interpretation more powerfully than demographic background by itself. Participants working inside government or law enforcement frequently adopted interpretive frameworks consistent with those positions, even when their identities or personal histories might have opened other interpretive possibilities.

The fractured lexicon, then, reflects more than disagreement over policy. It reflects the alignment of meaning with institutional position. Words such as reform, accountability, and respect circulate widely across stakeholder groups, but their content shifts depending on where the speaker stands within the architecture of policing. This is why public debate can appear morally aligned while remaining substantively fragmented. Shared language does not resolve unequal relationships to authority. It often reproduces them.

THE FRACTURED LEXICON

The fractured lexicon refers to the divergence of meaning attached to shared political vocabulary across institutional locations. Terms such as reform, accountability, safety, and respect sound widely agreed upon at the level of language. Yet their substantive content varies according to professional incentives, organizational responsibilities, and lived proximity to

police power. Actors invoke the same words while advancing incompatible understandings of what those words require in practice.

Within debates over policing, this divergence is patterned. Policymakers often translate reform into legislative adjustment, oversight structures, and administrative management. Law enforcement officials frame reform through professional competence, policy compliance, and organizational resilience. Community stakeholders frequently interpret reform as structural transformation requiring a redistribution of authority and resources away from policing and toward community institutions.

The same pattern appears in discussions of accountability. Policymakers tend to emphasize oversight systems, review processes, and enforceable transparency mechanisms. Law enforcement officials often describe accountability as internal discipline, proper investigation, and adherence to departmental policy. Community stakeholders generally define accountability in terms of meaningful consequences, public truth, and genuine recognition of harm.
Respect also carries divergent meanings. Policymakers often associate it with civility, trust in public institutions, and confidence in the rule of law. Law enforcement officials frequently interpret it as compliance, deference, and behavioral predictability during police encounters. Community stakeholders typically understand it as dignity, moral recognition, and the refusal of dehumanizing suspicion.

These differences do not arise because stakeholders simply hold different values. In many cases they all claim to value reform, accountability, respect, and safety. What differs is the institutional framework through which those values are understood. Policymakers govern institutions. Law enforcement officials enforce authority. Community stakeholders live with the

consequences of that enforcement. Shared vocabulary therefore does not bridge institutional difference. It often masks it.

The fractured lexicon helps explain why debates over policing can appear more aligned than they actually are. Because actors rely on the same terms, public disagreement is often misrecognized as a disagreement over degree rather than over substance. It may appear that stakeholders are all asking for the same basic goals but differ on method or pace. The interviews suggest something more fundamental. Beneath shared words lie competing understandings of harm, responsibility, legitimacy, and justice.

This dynamic becomes especially clear when examining three of the most prominent terms in participant narratives: reform, accountability, and respect.[20] Table 4.1 summarizes the dominant interpretations of key terms across stakeholder groups based on the patterns observed in interview narratives. Although the same terms circulate widely across debates about policing, their meanings shift depending on the institutional perspective from which they are articulated.

Table 4.1 Shared Vocabulary and Divergent Meanings Across Stakeholder Groups

Term	Policymakers	Law Enforcement	Community Stakeholders
Reform	legislative adjustment	policy management	structural transformation
Accountability	procedural oversight	internal discipline	consequences for misconduct
Respect	civility and institutional legitimacy	authority and compliance	dignity and recognition

*Note: Categories represent dominant narrative frames identified through comparative analysis of interview transcripts across stakeholder groups. Terms reflect analytic synthesis rather than mutually exclusive positions; individual participants sometimes expressed multiple interpretations.

In this way, the fractured lexicon operates as a mechanism of hegemonic stability. Shared vocabulary absorbs critique while allowing actors to speak past one another. Consensus appears

[20] Other terms also displayed patterned divergence across stakeholder groups but are not developed at length here because they bridge the narrative and affective analyses across Chapters 4 and 5. Safety, trust, and empathy were especially salient. Law enforcement participants typically defined safety through officer safety, control, vigilance, and risk management, while community stakeholders more often described safety as freedom from police violence, surveillance, and fear. Policymakers tended to frame safety in relation to crime, public order, and constituent anxiety. Trust and empathy followed similar lines of divergence. Law enforcement often associated trust with compliance and cooperation, policymakers with institutional credibility, and community participants with truth, accountability, and recognition of harm. These terms are noted here because they further illustrate the fractured lexicon, but they are treated more fully in the next chapter as part of the affective dynamics of policing.

possible at the level of language even when substantive agreement remains out of reach. The fractured lexicon becomes most visible when examining how stakeholders interpret specific terms that dominate contemporary debates over policing. The following sections examine three of the most frequently invoked concepts in participant narratives—reform, accountability, and respect—and demonstrate how their meanings diverge across institutional contexts.

Empirical Illustration of the Fractured Lexicon

The fractured lexicon becomes most visible when examining how participants attach meaning to the same terms in practice. Across interviews, stakeholders routinely invoked reform, accountability, and respect as shared goals. Yet when pressed to explain what those terms required, their meanings diverged sharply along institutional lines.

Among policymakers, reform was consistently framed through the language of governance, policy design, and institutional oversight. Tyler, a city-level official, described reform as a series of legislative and administrative interventions: "Raleigh quickly enacted the rest of the 8 Can't Wait policies… We had a police advisory board. We asked the legislature for oversight and subpoena power. We got a new police chief". Similarly, Brayden, a policymaker working in accountability infrastructure, emphasized that reform must be embedded in institutional authority: "Community review boards only matter if they have teeth – subpoena power, firing power – otherwise it's just paperwork". In these accounts, reform is defined by the creation and refinement of governance mechanisms. The central concern is whether institutions can be designed to function effectively within existing structures of authority.

Law enforcement officials described reform through a different institutional logic, one grounded in internal discipline, professional standards, and organizational adaptation. Matthew, a

deputy commissioner, explained, “Police reform is about creating an agency that is self-assessing and self-correcting” . Cameron, a senior officer, emphasized internal enforcement: “We change policy all the time, but if there are no consequences, then what’s the point?”. In these narratives, reform is not primarily about external oversight or redistribution of authority. It is about strengthening the organization’s ability to regulate itself. Even when acknowledging the need for change, reform remains oriented toward preserving institutional legitimacy and operational continuity.

Community stakeholders articulated reform as a fundamentally different political project. Rather than focusing on internal policy adjustments or administrative mechanisms, they defined reform in terms of structural transformation and redistribution. Jessica, a community stakeholder, explained, “They call these things reform, youth basketball games, community events. But reform means investing in housing, schools, and health”. Sonya, a community organizer, rejected existing reform efforts as symbolic: “They always roll out these PR stunts — ice cream trucks, youth basketball games, barbecues… it’s smoke and mirrors”. From this perspective, reform is not about improving police institutions. It is about reducing reliance on them by addressing the underlying social conditions that produce harm.

A similar pattern emerges in discussions of accountability. Policymakers again emphasized institutional design and oversight capacity. Andre, a state legislator, explained, “We have to build systems where accountability actually works. That means independent oversight, real resources, and the authority to enforce discipline when something goes wrong”. Law enforcement officials framed accountability as an internal process rooted in professional norms.

Tanisha, a high level police administrator, explained, “Accountability is making sure officers follow policy and that violations are investigated properly”. Korryn, a law enforcement

officer, emphasized peer responsibility: “We all have a duty to step in if we see something wrong. That’s real accountability”. Community stakeholders articulated a broader and more consequential definition. Terrell, a community advocate, stated, “Accountability means communities actually having the power to investigate and enforce consequences. Not just waiting for departments to police themselves”. Aiyana, a community stakeholder, added, “Accountability isn’t a press conference. It means the truth coming out and people being held responsible when someone is killed”. In these accounts, accountability is tied to power, consequence, and the public recognition of harm.

Respect, though widely invoked, revealed equally sharp divergence. Policymakers tended to frame respect in terms of institutional legitimacy and civic order. Savannah, a judge, explained, “Public institutions depend on a certain level of respect for the rule of law”. Law enforcement officials interpreted respect more situationally, linking it to compliance, deference, and behavioral control. Charles, a former officer, described disrespect as a trigger for escalation: “Disrespect is what escalates conflict. If people had more respect… these things wouldn’t blow up”. Elijah, a former officer, emphasized hierarchy and authority: “If people respected authority, half of these problems wouldn’t exist”. Community stakeholders defined respect as dignity and recognition of humanity. Ta’Kiya, a community organizer, explained, “Respect means treating us with dignity, not suspicion” . Brandon, a community stakeholder, emphasized, “Respect means seeing us as humans, not targets”. Frank, a community expert, clarified, “Respect isn’t blind deference to authority — it’s about treating people fairly”. For those most directly subject to policing, respect is not about deference to authority. It is about the absence of dehumanization.

These accounts illustrate how a shared moral vocabulary can obscure deep disagreement over the meaning of change, the location of authority, and the definition of justice. Participants

across all groups claim to value reform, accountability, and respect. Yet they attach those terms to different institutional arrangements, different expectations of power, and different visions of social order. The fractured lexicon does not simply reflect disagreement. It structures it, allowing actors to speak in a common language while advancing fundamentally different political projects.

Reform

Across stakeholder groups, reform was the most frequently invoked term in discussions of policing and the one around which consensus was thinnest. Participants in every group agreed that some form of reform was necessary following highly publicized incidents of police violence and the protest wave that followed. But the meaning of reform varied considerably depending on institutional role and relationship to policing. People used the same word to describe different political horizons.

For many participants, reform was where institutional position became most visible. Stephon, a Black prosecutor working within the legal and administrative machinery of public accountability, described reform through the language of institutional design. Reflecting on the creation of an advisory board, he explained:

> "*We created an advisory board, but without subpoena power the policy has no teeth. Reform has to mean more than creating another layer of bureaucracy. It has to mean giving people real power."*

Stephon did not reject reform language. He sharpened it. In his account, reform meant building mechanisms with authority, enforceability, and institutional durability. The concern was not

simply whether reform was morally desirable but whether it could function inside existing legal structures. This is a governance-centered interpretation. Reform becomes a question of institutional capacity.

Sariah, a white municipal official involved in post-2020 reform efforts, described a different version of the same problem. In her telling, reform debates often defaulted to familiar administrative responses that signaled action without transforming outcomes:

> *"Every time there's a crisis, the answer is more training. Training is always the go-to, but it hasn't transformed outcomes."*

Her statement reveals both recognition and constraint. Reform, in this account, is filtered through the habitual tools of governance. Institutions know how to mandate training, revise policy manuals, and issue new requirements. Those solutions are administratively legible, politically defensible, and publicly recognizable. Yet precisely because they are familiar, they can become substitutes for deeper institutional change.

Law enforcement officials often described reform in markedly different terms. For many officers, reform was less a moral project than a professional issue, shaped by the gap between policy discourse and the practical conditions of police work. Dalvin, a Black patrol officer with extensive field experience, dismissed reform talk that merely added administrative burden without changing the realities of the job:

> "*They keep saying more training is reform, but it's the same slideshow every year. Reform has become a buzzword."*

Dalvin's account is important because it does not simply reject reform. It exposes the emptiness of reform language when it becomes detached from real transformation in everyday practice.

Reform, in this frame, is experienced as a repetitive administrative ritual rather than meaningful change.

At higher ranks, reform was often tied to organizational resilience. Marcus, a multiracial senior law enforcement official responsible for departmental policy and compliance, explained:

> "*Reform for me is building a self-correcting culture. My job is to make sure the organization can survive federal scrutiny."*

Here reform is linked directly to institutional survival. The aim is not to redistribute authority away from policing but to preserve organizational legitimacy under external pressure. This is a critical distinction. Reform becomes a strategy for adaptation, one that helps the institution weather crisis while remaining fundamentally intact.

Community stakeholders narrated reform differently. Sonya, a Black grassroots organizer working on police accountability, described the creation of a civilian oversight board after sustained protest pressure:

> *"They gave us a board, but they watered it down so much it doesn't hold anyone accountable."*

For Sonya, the issue was not whether officials had responded, but whether that response altered who held power. A board without teeth was not real reform. It was institutional containment dressed in reform language.

Jessica, a Latina nonprofit leader working with families affected by police violence, widened the frame further:

> "*They call these things reform, youth basketball games, community events. But reform means investing in housing, schools, and health."*

Jessica's account moves beyond procedural change and beyond the internal management of police institutions. Reform, for her, means changing the social conditions that produce repeated police contact in the first place. Housing, schools, health care, and non-police responses to crisis are not secondary concerns. They are the substance of meaningful reform.

Set alongside one another, these narratives reveal the fractured lexicon clearly. Policymakers often understand reform as institutional design, feasible policy change, and administrative improvement. Law enforcement officials often frame reform through professional adaptation and organizational survival. Community stakeholders frequently define reform as structural transformation requiring a shift in resources, authority, and the very organization of public safety. The same word travels across these positions, but it does not carry the same horizon of change.

Accountability

Accountability appeared as consistently as reform across interviews, and like reform, it was widely endorsed but differently defined. Participants in all three groups described accountability as essential to public trust and institutional legitimacy. Yet when they explained what accountability actually required, the similarities quickly broke down.

Among policymakers, accountability was most often framed as a problem of institutional oversight. Andre, a Black state legislator engaged in criminal justice policy debates, described accountability in terms of building systems that could function independently and effectively:

> *"We have to build systems where accountability actually works. That means independent oversight, real resources, and the authority to enforce discipline when something goes wrong."*

This is a governance-oriented definition. Accountability means institutional capacity: independent review, adequate resources, enforceable process, and systems that can credibly respond to misconduct. It does not necessarily reject existing institutions, but it insists that oversight mechanisms have enough authority to matter.

Other policymakers echoed similar concerns through support for civilian review boards, transparency laws, and reporting structures. In these narratives, accountability is often treated as a problem of design. The central question is whether oversight systems can be made robust enough to restore trust and constrain abuse.

Law enforcement officials often framed accountability more internally. Tanisha, a Black police administrator, defined it as the enforcement of professional standards:

> *"Accountability is making sure officers follow policy and that violations are investigated properly. If we don't enforce our own rules, then the system loses credibility."*

Her account casts accountability as a professional ethic rooted in internal legitimacy. Departments maintain credibility when they investigate violations, discipline misconduct, and uphold their own standards. This framing centers internal regulation rather than external redistribution of authority.

India, a Black patrol supervisor with extensive field experience, added another layer by emphasizing the pressures under which police decisions are made:

> "*Part of this is a lack of understanding of when an officer is going to use deadly force and what situations lead to that. Those decisions happen in seconds, and they have to be reviewed fairly."*

In this version, accountability includes due process for officers. The concern is not only whether harm occurred, but whether review processes properly account for uncertainty, risk, and split-

second decision making. Accountability thus becomes inseparable from fairness to police themselves.

Community stakeholders articulated a broader and more adversarial understanding. Terrell, a Black community advocate with decades of organizing experience, rejected the idea that departments should remain the primary site of accountability:

> "*Accountability means communities actually having the power to investigate and enforce consequences. Not just waiting for departments to police themselves."*

This is not merely a call for better oversight. It is a demand to relocate authority. Accountability, in this frame, requires that communities have real power to investigate harm and impose consequences independent of police institutions.

Aiyana, a younger organizer involved in protest mobilization after several high-profile police killings, emphasized the public and moral dimensions of accountability:

> "*Accountability isn't a press conference. It means the truth coming out and people being held responsible when someone is killed."*

Her statement highlights the gap between symbolic institutional performance and substantive consequence. A public statement, internal review, or official expression of concern does not satisfy accountability if truth is obscured and responsibility goes unenforced.

These accounts make clear that accountability operates as a shared moral principle but a contested institutional practice. For policymakers, it often means building oversight systems that function. For law enforcement officials, it often means internal discipline carried out fairly within professional structures. For community stakeholders, it means the public recognition of harm, meaningful consequences, and a transfer of investigative authority away from police institutions themselves. One term circulates widely, but it contains different assumptions about

where authority should reside and what justice demands.

Respect

Respect was one of the most emotionally charged concepts in the data and one of the clearest points at which the hegemonic and interpersonal domains began to overlap. Participants across stakeholder groups invoked respect as essential to police-community relations, but they used the term to name very different social expectations. For many policymakers, respect referred to civic trust and institutional legitimacy. Savannah, a white judge who regularly presides over criminal cases involving police encounters, described respect as foundational to confidence in public institutions:

> "*Public institutions depend on a certain level of respect for the rule of law. Without that, it becomes very difficult to maintain trust in the system."*

In this account, respect is a civic orientation toward institutions. It is less about the emotional texture of individual encounters than about maintaining confidence in legal authority and democratic order.

Law enforcement officials often defined respect in more immediate and situational terms. Dalvin, the Black patrol officer quoted earlier, described police work as saturated with uncertainty:

> "*Every call could be your last."*

He elaborated:

> "*When you walk into a situation, you have to assume things could turn dangerous in a second."*

In this frame, respect is closely tied to compliance, deference, and behavioral predictability. Respect is not simply an interpersonal nicety. It is a condition that reduces uncertainty in encounters that officers believe can turn deadly very quickly. The concern is danger management. Respect becomes the recognition of police authority in ways that make situations easier to control.

Community stakeholders described respect through an entirely different moral lens. Mable, a Black community organizer working with families affected by police violence, explained:

> "*Respect means seeing our kids as human beings first. Too often they're treated like suspects before anything even happens."*

Her definition stands in direct contrast to the law enforcement emphasis on compliance. The central issue is not behavioral deference to authority but whether young people are approached as human beings rather than as threats. The problem is not the absence of order. It is the presence of suspicion and dehumanization. Roxanne, a longtime violence prevention advocate, linked respect to everyday safety:

> *"Safety is being able to live your life without feeling like you're constantly under suspicion."*

Her account underscores the everyday social consequences of disrespectful policing. Constant suspicion is not just emotionally corrosive. It reorganizes what safety means. Safety cannot be reduced to police presence if that presence itself communicates danger, mistrust, and exposure to humiliation.

Respect therefore offers a vivid example of the fractured lexicon. Policymakers often link it to civic trust in institutions. Law enforcement officials associate it with compliance and risk

reduction. Community stakeholders define it as dignity, recognition, and freedom from dehumanizing suspicion. These are not minor differences in emphasis. They point to different social realities. For one group, respect secures authority. For another, it names the refusal of degradation.

FALSE CONSENSUS AND INSTITUTIONAL STABILITY

Shared language can create the appearance of moral alignment even when stakeholders attach different meanings to the same terms. This dynamic produces false consensus. Actors believe they are moving toward similar goals because they rely on a common vocabulary, yet their interpretations of that vocabulary diverge in ways that limit coordinated action and preserve institutional stability.

In debates over policing, terms such as reform, accountability, and respect function as widely accepted moral signifiers. Few participants reject them outright. Policymakers, law enforcement officials, and community stakeholders all describe these values as important. At the level of discourse, this shared language creates the impression that the main conflict lies in implementation, pace, or political will.

Closer analysis suggests otherwise. Participants use the same words while describing different institutional arrangements, different standards of legitimacy, and different understandings of what counts as change. A policymaker may view the creation of a civilian oversight board as a significant reform because it expands review and transparency. A law enforcement official may support the same board so long as it preserves departmental autonomy and due process protections. A community organizer may evaluate that same body by asking whether it can subpoena officers, compel evidence, and impose meaningful consequences. Each

actor can claim to support reform while holding incompatible assumptions about whether power has actually shifted.

False consensus does not eliminate disagreement. It delays and obscures it. Shared language allows actors to temporarily align around broad values while deferring open conflict over the institutional arrangements required to realize those values. Disagreement often becomes visible only when policy moves from rhetoric to design or from design to implementation. This has major consequences for coalition building. Broad rhetorical alignment can generate initial momentum. Yet once stakeholders confront the details of what reform, accountability, or respect should actually entail, the coalition can fracture. This is not simply because some actors are insincere. It is because the shared vocabulary was never attached to shared meaning in the first place.

The result is a discursive environment in which critique can be acknowledged without being resolved. Institutions can adopt the language of accountability, reform, and community trust while continuing to structure those concepts in ways compatible with existing power relations. Shared vocabulary becomes a container through which pressure is absorbed. Criticism enters the discourse, but its most transformative implications are often neutralized as different stakeholders reattach institutional meanings to the same terms.

Institutional incentives reinforce this pattern. Policymakers operate within systems that reward incremental, administratively legible change. Law enforcement agencies prioritize organizational legitimacy, professional discretion, and operational continuity. Community stakeholders often center lived experience, moral injury, and structural transformation. Because these positions carry different risks and responsibilities, they also stabilize meaning differently.

False consensus emerges not because actors fail to communicate, but because they communicate through a shared lexicon that is structured by unequal relationships to power.

The fractured lexicon is therefore not incidental to hegemonic stability. It is one of the mechanisms through which hegemony persists. Shared language allows institutions to recognize criticism while narrowing the field of what that criticism can become. So long as disagreement remains embedded within competing interpretations of familiar terms, structural transformation is easier to postpone.

Narrative Fragmentation and the Racialized Division of Labor

The narrative fragmentation documented in this chapter reflects more than disagreement over policing policy. It reflects the alignment between meaning and institutional position within a broader racialized system of power. Drawing on Collins' Matrix of Domination, I argue that policymakers, law enforcement officials, and community stakeholders occupy different locations within the governance, enforcement, and experiential dimensions of policing. These positions shape not only what actors see, but what forms of interpretation appear reasonable, legitimate, and actionable.

The fractured lexicon therefore does not emerge from misunderstanding alone. It emerges from a racialized division of institutional labor that organizes how policing is known, defended, contested, and endured. Policymakers tend to narrate policing through feasibility, procedure, and institutional constraint. Law enforcement officials often frame the same terrain through operational legitimacy, professional authority, and risk management. Community stakeholders most often interpret policing through lived harm, moral injury, and the struggle for dignity and

recognition. These are not simply different opinions. They are distinct interpretive logics rooted in unequal relations to authority, accountability, and violence.

Seen in this way, the hegemonic domain does not stabilize police power by producing full agreement. It stabilizes police power by allowing familiar terms such as reform, accountability, and respect to circulate across institutional locations without requiring shared meaning. The result is a form of bounded plurality in which critique is absorbed, translated, and often redirected into managerial or procedural responses rather than structural change. Shared language helps manage conflict while preserving institutional legitimacy.

This pattern clarifies why reform remains so difficult to achieve. Stakeholders may appear to endorse the same principles while advancing incompatible understandings of responsibility, remedy, and justice. The fractured lexicon is therefore not simply evidence of poor communication. It reveals how the hegemonic domain organizes meaning through a racialized hierarchy of institutional labor.

From Narrative Fragmentation to Affective Misalignment

This chapter has argued that the hegemonic domain sustains police power not through genuine shared agreement, but through shared language whose meanings remain fractured across institutional positions. Terms such as reform, accountability, and respect circulate widely in contemporary policing debates and appear to express moral consensus. Yet the interviews analyzed here show that these terms conceal divergent understandings of harm, authority, responsibility, and change.

The fractured lexicon helps explain why debates over policing so often produce rhetorical convergence without substantive alignment. Shared language creates the appearance of

consensus, but that consensus is often false. Reform may mean administrative adjustment, professional adaptation, or structural redistribution. Accountability may mean oversight design, internal discipline, or community power to impose consequences. Respect may mean civic trust, compliance with authority, or dignity and recognition. Because these differences remain partly hidden within common terms, institutions can absorb critique without confronting the full implications of that critique.

Seen through Collins' Matrix of Domination, this fragmentation reflects the organization of power across the hegemonic domain. Meaning aligns with institutional role. Governance labor, enforcement labor, and labor shaped by exposure to harm generate distinct interpretive frameworks. The result is not simply disagreement. It is a patterned form of narrative divergence rooted in a racialized distribution of authority and vulnerability.

If this chapter shows how stakeholders talk past one another, Chapter 5 examines how they feel past one another. The same institutional positions that shape narrative interpretation also shape emotional orientation. Fear, grief, resentment, defensiveness, and moral exhaustion do not circulate evenly across groups, nor do they attach to the same objects in the same way. The next chapter turns to the interpersonal domain to examine how police power is lived, felt, and reproduced through affective misalignment. It shows that fragmentation within the matrix of domination operates not only through contested meaning, but also through unequal emotional worlds that shape whose suffering is legible, whose fear is authorized, and which futures remain imaginable.

CHAPTER 5:

DEHUMANIZATION AND AFFECTIVE MISALIGNMENT

The Interpersonal Domain

This chapter turns to the interpersonal domain to examine how police power is felt and lived in everyday life. Drawing on Collins' Matrix of Domination, the interpersonal domain is conceptualized as the site where structural, disciplinary, and hegemonic power become embodied and emotionally consequential. Policing is encountered here not primarily as law or policy, but through fear, grief, vigilance, humiliation, and moral judgment. These emotional experiences are not incidental reactions. They are central to how domination is sustained and made durable.

I argue that policing operates as a form of affective governance. Police authority is reproduced not only through law, policy, or public narrative, but through the production of durable emotional conditions that shape how individuals interpret threat, safety, legitimacy, and belonging. Fear, grief, and vigilance are cultivated through routine encounters, anticipation, memory, and vicarious exposure to police violence. Drawing on narrative interviews with community members, law enforcement actors, and policymakers, I treat affect not as a private psychological outcome, but as a patterned social condition through which power operates.

A growing body of interdisciplinary scholarship documents the emotional and psychological consequences of policing, particularly for racially marginalized communities. Exposure to police violence, both direct and vicarious, is associated with stress, trauma, disrupted sleep, and prolonged grief, with effects that extend beyond individuals to families and communities. While this scholarship convincingly demonstrates cumulative harm, it often treats

affect primarily as a consequence of policing. This chapter instead analyzes emotion as constitutive of police authority itself. The sections that follow examine how fear operates as an affective regime, how grief is privatized and depoliticized, how moral injury emerges under particular conditions, and how affective misalignment helps stabilize the racialized labor hierarchy despite widespread demands for change. In this sense, policing does not simply regulate behavior. It organizes the emotional conditions through which social reality is perceived, navigated, and endured.

Research on dehumanization provides a critical lens for understanding how these emotional conditions are produced and sustained. Dehumanization refers to processes through which individuals or groups are denied full moral recognition, either by being cast as lacking uniquely human qualities or by being stripped of basic human vulnerability and dignity. In policing contexts, dehumanization operates through professional language, routine practices, and cultural norms that normalize suspicion, distance, and coercion, allowing harm to be rationalized as necessary or inevitable. Importantly, the emotional consequences of dehumanizing policing are cumulative. Repeated police contact, surveillance, and discretionary enforcement generate harms that extend well beyond any single encounter. Exposure to police violence, whether direct or vicarious, produces stress responses that circulate through communities through media, storytelling, and collective memory. What appears institutionally as an isolated event is often lived collectively as an accumulating condition.

I refer to the interpersonal expression of this condition as affective misalignment: the systematic divergence between how different groups are permitted, encouraged, or required to feel within the same institutional context, and how those emotional orientations are recognized as legitimate. Within policing, this misalignment is structured rather than accidental. Institutional

actors are authorized to experience and express fear, urgency, and threat as rational and actionable, while community members' fear, grief, and vulnerability are more likely to be dismissed, reframed, or rendered suspect. This unequal recognition shapes whose perceptions of reality carry authority and whose are discounted. Situated within Collins' Matrix of Domination, affective misalignment operates in the interpersonal domain as the embodied translation of structural and hegemonic inequality. The racialized labor hierarchy organizes not only who is exposed to coercion, but how emotional responses to that coercion are distributed and interpreted.

If Chapter 4 demonstrates how stakeholders talk past one another, this chapter examines how they *feel* past one another. The same institutional positions that shape narrative interpretation also shape emotional orientation. Fear, grief, resentment, defensiveness and moral exhaustion do not circulate evenly across groups. The fractured lexicon therefore extends into an affective domain. Stakeholders may share concerns with accountability, safety, and legitimacy; yet lack shared emotional frameworks through which those concerns converge. In that sense, fragmentation within the Matrix of Domination operates not only through contested meaning, but through unequal emotional worlds that shape whose suffering is recognized, whose fear is legitimized and what futures remain imaginable.

AFFECTIVE MISALIGNMENT AND THE REPRODUCTION OF POLICE POWER

A growing body of sociological, psychological, and public health research demonstrates that policing operates not only through law, policy, and narrative, but through the production of durable emotional conditions that shape everyday life. Direct and vicarious encounters with police authority are consistently associated with fear, stress, trauma, grief, and legal cynicism,

particularly among racially marginalized communities (Brunson 2007; McLeod et al. 2019; Turney 2020; Greene, Urbanik, and Samuels-Wortley 2022a; Sosoo, MacCormack, and Neblett 2022). Qualitative research further shows that police violence is not experienced as a series of discrete incidents, but as an ongoing condition that reshapes how people inhabit public space, assess risk, and understand their own worth and belonging (Greene, Urbanik, and Samuels-Wortley 2022a). These findings establish that police power is lived interpersonally and affectively interpreted rather than encountered only as episodic enforcement.

Research on dehumanization provides a critical lens for understanding how these emotional conditions are produced and sustained. Dehumanization refers to processes through which individuals or groups are denied full moral recognition, either by being cast as lacking uniquely human qualities or by being stripped of basic human vulnerability and dignity (Haslam 2006). Empirical studies demonstrate that dehumanization legitimizes punitive responses and facilitates violence against marginalized populations, particularly Black Americans (Goff et al. 2014; Kteily et al. 2015). In policing contexts, dehumanization operates through professional language, routine practices, and cultural norms that normalize suspicion, distance, and coercion, allowing harm to be rationalized as necessary or inevitable (Bustamante et al. 2019; Haslam 2006; Zlobina and Andujar 2021).

Importantly, the emotional consequences of dehumanizing policing are cumulative. Repeated police contact, surveillance, and discretionary enforcement generate harms that extend well beyond any single encounter (Bustamante et al. 2019; Perillo et al. 2023). Exposure to police violence, whether direct or vicarious, produces affective and physiological stress responses that circulate through communities through media, storytelling, and collective memory (McLeod et al. 2019; Sosoo et al. 2022). Feminist and critical race scholarship further shows that

these harms are unevenly distributed and frequently obscured by legal and institutional frameworks that privilege formal neutrality over lived experience (Collins 2000; Macaulay 2024).

While this literature clearly demonstrates the emotional consequences of policing, it often treats affect as an outcome rather than as a mechanism of power. This chapter advances a different claim. Fear, grief, and vigilance are not merely reactions to policing. They are patterned conditions through which authority is interpreted, legitimacy is felt or refused, and inequality is reproduced in everyday encounters.

I refer to this condition as affective misalignment: the systematic divergence between how different groups are permitted, encouraged, or required to feel within the same institutional context, and how those emotional orientations are recognized as legitimate. Within policing, this misalignment is structured rather than accidental. Institutional actors are authorized to experience and express fear, urgency, and threat as rational and actionable, while community members' fear, grief, and vulnerability are more likely to be dismissed, reframed, or rendered suspect. This unequal recognition shapes whose perceptions of reality carry authority and whose are discounted.

Situated within Collins' Matrix of Domination, affective misalignment operates in the interpersonal domain as the embodied translation of structural and hegemonic inequality. The racialized labor hierarchy organizes not only who is exposed to coercion, but how emotional responses to that coercion are distributed and interpreted. I use asymmetric empathy later in the chapter to describe one mechanism through which this misalignment is reproduced, and affective governance to name the broader process through which institutions organize emotion to stabilize

authority. These concepts show that dehumanization operates not only through discourse or policy, but through the uneven recognition of emotion itself.

Using narrative interviews that foreground lived experience, the analysis that follows traces how affect circulates across everyday encounters with policing. Rather than simply comparing stakeholder groups, I focus on the dominant emotional registers policing generates as an institution [fear, grief, and vigilance] and on how those emotions' structure interaction, interpretation, and possibility. In doing so, this chapter theorizes affect as an interpersonal infrastructure of police power, showing how domination is reproduced not only through law, discipline, or narrative, but through the emotional conditions that make those forms of power livable and durable.

Fear as an Affective Regime

Fear emerged across interviews, not as a singular feeling, but as a patterned condition structured by institutional position. By affective regime, I mean a durable and institutionally reinforced emotional environment that organizes how individuals perceive threat, interpret authority, and regulate their own conduct. Unlike episodic fear, which rises and recedes with a discrete event, this form of fear is cumulative. It is produced through repetition, anticipation, and shared exposure, and it structures action even when no officer is immediately present. Fear, in this sense, is not simply caused by policing. It is one of the conditions through which policing becomes routine and durable. Community participants most often described fear as ambient, cumulative, and bodily. It shaped whether they called the police, how they moved through public space, and how they interpreted even routine contact with authority. Fanta a community member

from Raleigh, NC was asked "What do you think that people in your community think about the police?" She replied:

> "I don't think they think very highly of them at all, because we've seen so many deaths by police here over the last, I'm going to say, seven to eight years. One of those persons, including my [relative]. But they are pretty much fearful of the police. And I've heard lot of people say that they wouldn't even call the police if there was something going on, because of the fear of being harmed themselves."

Fanta describes fear as cumulative. For her it is rooted in in "so many deaths by police," not in a single encounter. Second, fear is collective. Fanta moves from the death of a loved one to what "people" in the community do and do not feel able to do. Third, fear reorganizes the meaning of protection itself. The institution that formally claims to provide safety becomes one that people avoid, even in situations where help might otherwise be sought. Affectively, the passage moves from grief to communal withdrawal without marking a clear boundary between them. That movement is analytically important because it shows how fear travels through loss and becomes infrastructural. Her narrative also highlights how fear is sustained not only by memory of the original harm, but by the continuing assertion of impunity:

> "Then also, the conversation that they have with people when they know who they've hurt or killed, and then the threats that come after to community members, such as, 'You want me to do you like I did your boy?' Like, they're cocky out here now and they don't care still about what's going on. And those are the real life things that are happening."

This passage shows fear as domination, not uncertainty alone. The threat draws its force from prior violence not threatened harm. The emotional register here for Fanta was not panic but exhausted insistence. When she says "*Those are the real life things that are happening*" her

voice is steady but intense, seemingly making an effort to push back against normalization. The threat has become ordinary enough to require affirmation that it is real. That is precisely what makes fear an affective regime.

Brandon, a violence interrupter expands this pattern by showing how fear circulates through uncertainty about police as moral actors. He says:

> "There's a lot of apprehension about police because of the big thing recently, the George Floyd situation, and just unsure about where do you trust them at? Meaning, do you trust them with your family if there's a issue? Are they here to bring law or are they here to basically oppress? Because that's a big thing with the African American community throughout the history of policing in this country."

This passage offers, not a scene of immediate violence but of suspended trust. Affectively, apprehension sits between fear and judgment. It names a condition in which police presence cannot be interpreted straightforwardly as either help or threat. That ambiguity itself becomes governing. The repeated questions, "do you trust them," "are they here," show that fear operates through interpretive instability. One is not simply afraid of what police might do. One is forced to decide, often in real time, whether the institution in front of you is protective or oppressive. This uncertainty is itself a form of harm because it pushes everyday life into constant risk calculation.

Aiyana captures the collective and lingering quality of this fear with unusual clarity when she says "People are afraid of being harmed. There's a lot of uncertainty about safety. When incidents happen, they ripple through the whole community. It never really goes away." Her statement is analytically useful. Fear is not individualized. It ripples through whole communities. She also describes it, not as temporary but as a fixture that never really fades. The force of this

quote lies in its lack of embellishment. Aiyana is matter of fact in her tone when she says this. Collective insecurity has become ordinary enough to be stated without drama, showcasing one way affective regimes work. They normalize what should be politically intolerable.

Valentina a journalist adds another important layer by discussing how fear persists alongside frustrated efforts at reform.

> "I think there's a relationship in St. Louis that's a little challenged because St. Louis is a city that's a county and then there's other counties in our region and within the city of St. Louis, I think that there's a fear of police on a certain level, but there's a possibility to realign their roles so they wouldn't be in these situations where it would cause people fear. I think there's a lot of awareness of that, and so there's been moves to go in that direction, but it is a city in this oasis, and we are in this state that absolutely does not believe that. So there's just like no matter what the city does in order to address what their relationship of the police should be, it is constantly being challenged by state politics."

What matters here is the movement from recognition to blockage. There is a "possibility" of realignment, but it is repeatedly obstructed. Affectively, the quote registers frustration rather than shock. Fear is sustained not only by direct contact but by repeated institutional failures to redress community harm. Fear therefore operates hierarchically. For community members, it is chronic, anticipatory, and bound to vulnerability, surveillance, and abandonment. For institutional actors, fear is more readily legible as crisis, threat, and grounds for intervention. The point is not simply that different stakeholders fear different things. It is that some fear is institutionally authorized while other fear is rendered suspect. This uneven recognition is one of the clearest interpersonal expressions of affective misalignment.

Within policing, fear is not confined to moments of crisis. It is cultivated and routinized through repeated encounters with police authority and the anticipation of those encounters. Sociological and public health research demonstrates that police violence functions as a chronic stressor that reshapes how individuals move through public space, interpret risk, and assess vulnerability (McLeod et al. 2019; Turney 2020; Greene, Urbanik, and Samuels-Wortley 2022b). Fear, in this sense, is not simply a response to policing but a condition produced by it. Research on vicarious exposure underscores the durability of this affective environment. Experimental studies show that witnessing or learning about police violence produces measurable stress responses even among individuals not directly targeted (Sosoo, MacCormack, and Neblett 2022). Media coverage, community storytelling, and collective memory extend fear beyond individual encounters, transforming isolated incidents into shared emotional knowledge that shapes expectations and behavior in advance of future interaction with law enforcement.

The interviews give this literature empirical texture. Community fear was repeatedly described as collective and vicarious rather than merely personal. Participants referenced videos, neighborhood storytelling, and shared memory as sources of affective knowledge, such that harm did not need to be experienced firsthand to become real. Fear governed through anticipation. Individuals learned to regulate their movements, voices, and emotional expression in advance of any direct encounter because the possibility of escalation was never fully absent. In this sense, fear functioned as a form of anticipatory discipline. It narrowed action before formal coercion was even required. Fear also operates as a mechanism of power by structuring perception, constraining behavior, and narrowing the field of possible action. At the individual level, fear heightens vigilance, narrows attention, and prioritizes immediate survival over long-term or collective action. At the collective level, fear fragments social coordination by shifting attention

away from shared response and toward individualized risk management. These dynamics are well documented in social-psychological research, which shows that chronic threat environments produce avoidance, hypervigilance, and reduced willingness to engage in uncertain or potentially costly forms of action.

Dehumanization is central to the operation of fear as a governing mechanism. When individuals are routinely treated as suspicious or threatening, fear becomes both imposed and internalized. Psychological research demonstrates that dehumanization facilitates punitive responses by stripping targets of moral recognition and expanding the range of acceptable harm (Haslam 2006; Kteily et al. 2015). In policing contexts, dehumanization is embedded in routine practices such as surveillance, discretionary enforcement, and institutional language (Bustamante et al. 2019). These practices teach individuals to anticipate danger not only from police action itself, but from misrecognition and escalation, making uncertainty itself a source of fear. Community stakeholders described police interactions in which they were not approached as residents, parents, workers, or mourners, but as possible threats requiring management. In one interview, a policymaker from Kansas City, MO described how people who were not committing crimes nonetheless felt unfairly targeted, surveilled, and blamed. That account captures a broader pattern. What makes fear durable is not only the possibility of force, but the uncertainty of recognition. Individuals cannot assume they will be seen accurately or treated proportionately. Dehumanization thus transforms fear into an embodied survival strategy rather than a momentary reaction.

Fear within this regime is unevenly recognized. Some forms of fear are institutionalized as reasonable and necessary, while others are dismissed as irrational or threatening. Research shows that fear expressed by residents of heavily policed communities is often reframed as

hostility or noncompliance rather than recognized as a rational response to repeated exposure to state violence (Brunson 2007; Greene, Urbanik, and Samuels-Wortley 2022a). This uneven recognition transforms fear into a disciplinary mechanism. Individuals must regulate not only their behavior, but their emotional expression in order to remain legible within institutional interaction. At the same time, fear did not only govern those most exposed to police power. It also structured the emotional life of institutions charged with preserving it. A law enforcement chief of police described the unrest in his jurisdiction during the summer of 2020 as a "nightmare scenario" and framed the experience through officer injury, institutional vulnerability, and the collapse of public support. In these narratives, fear was narrated as a threat to organizational continuity and professional legitimacy. This contrast is important. Institutional fear was more readily recognized as rational, urgent, and actionable. Community fear, by contrast, was far more likely to be privatized, suppressed, or interpreted as volatility.

This asymmetry reflects the operation of affective misalignment. Fear is not absent across stakeholder positions, but differently attached. For community members, fear attaches to surveillance, police violence, and abandonment. For law enforcement, it attaches to uncertainty, bodily threat, and loss of control. For policymakers, it more often attaches to disorder, political backlash, and institutional failure. These fears are all experienced as real, but they are not equally recognized or equally actionable. The result is not that one side feels while the other does not. It is that fear is differentially recognized. Some fear authorizes action. Other fear must be managed in order to remain legible. Under these conditions, fear does not simply accompany policing. It organizes the conditions under which policing is interpreted, navigated, and endured. As an affective regime, fear converts coercive power into an everyday reality, structuring behavior in advance of action and reproducing domination through lived experience rather than overt force.

Fear is not simply produced by policing. It is useful to it.

Grief as Privatized and Depoliticized Harm

If fear governs anticipation, grief governs aftermath. Within the interpersonal domain, grief is not simply an emotional response to loss but a socially organized condition through which the consequences of police power are absorbed, interpreted, and managed. Police violence produces grief not only in the immediate wake of death or injury, but through the cumulative awareness that such harm is possible, repeated, and unevenly distributed. In this sense, grief is not confined to singular events. It becomes part of the lived environment of policing, shaping how individuals understand safety, vulnerability, and the limits of institutional protection.

Fanta's account makes this dynamic unmistakable.

> "I think the comfort level of the community people not wanting to be in the same space as them, because of so much pain that's going around in the community from losing our loved ones to police violence. I know that's a fact for myself and my family and I've dealt with a lot of other families who it's happened to. It took me this long, seven years to even sit at the table with a cop. And the new chief is only one that I've sat down with in the last seven years, since I had to sit down with all those ones when my son was killed."

The statement is delivered plainly, without elaboration, but followed by a brief pause that lingers. The absence of emphasis does not diminish its weight; it underscores the normalization of loss. Her son's death is not narrated as an isolated event, but as one instance within an accumulating history of harm. Grief, in her account, is therefore not episodic. It is enduring and socially embedded. This endurance is evident in how she describes her continued engagement

with policing and reform: it took "seven years to even sit at the table with a cop," a timeline that reflects not only time passed but the slow, uneven labor of re-entering interaction after loss.

Later Fanta makes the cumulative dimension even clearer saying:

> "For me, it was like reliving. Every incident is like reliving it from my own experience with my [relative]. To see the tears and the pain in the families who's lost a loved one is just horrific. It hurts so bad. There's no way of comforting them at that time to me."

This is one of the strongest passages in the chapter because grief is narrated as recursive. New incidents do not simply add new losses. They reopen earlier ones. The affective register here is not only sadness but reliving, an involuntary return that collapses past and present. That matters analytically because it shows that grief is not just the emotional residue of police violence. It is one mechanism through which police violence extends itself across time and across families.

Crucially, this grief is not contained within the moment of loss. It extends outward and forward, shaping both emotional life and social behavior. Fanta links grief directly to fear and withdrawal, explaining that people in her community "wouldn't even call the police… because of the fear of being harmed themselves." As she describes this, her tone lowers and her pacing slows, signaling not only fear but resignation. Grief, in this sense, becomes infrastructural. It is not only a response to violence but part of the conditions through which future interactions are anticipated and avoided. Loss reorganizes trust, participation, and the perceived availability of protection, producing a social environment in which safety itself becomes uncertain.

This pattern is not confined to those who have experienced direct loss. Across interviews, grief emerges as collective and cumulative, circulating through networks of families, communities, and advocates. Sandra describes working with "so many different parents, and families of people that had been killed by police," emphasizing the repetition and similarity of

these losses across cases. As she recounts these experiences, her cadence quickens slightly, as if listing becomes a way to hold together the scale of what she has witnessed. These are not isolated tragedies. They form a recognizable pattern that binds individuals through shared exposure to harm. At the same time, she makes clear that this grief does not carry equal weight in political life. “When it was just the impacted people,” she explains, “the General Assembly wasn’t ready to move forward.” The statement is delivered with a trace of frustration, reflecting the gap between the presence of harm and the willingness to acknowledge it.

Her reflection on the protests following George Floyd’s murder captures the emotional stakes of that recognition. She describes being “reduced to tears,” pausing briefly before continuing, as she recalls the moment. The pause does not signal uncertainty but the difficulty of condensing a long history of disregard into a single point of recognition. What appears, on the surface, as a moment of collective awakening is also an indictment: grief had been present all along, but it had not been sufficient to compel response. Recognition arrives late, unevenly, and often only under conditions of broad visibility.

What becomes clear across these accounts is that grief is both collective and stratified. It circulates widely, yet it is not equally acknowledged. Those closest to loss are required to carry it, articulate it, and often defend its legitimacy, while institutions retain the ability to treat each instance as discrete, unfortunate, and contained. In this way, grief is routinely privatized. Loss is framed as personal tragedy rather than public injury, separating mourning from critique and limiting the extent to which it can function as a challenge to institutional legitimacy.

This privatization is consequential. When grief is individualized, its capacity to generate collective demand is weakened. Families and communities remain responsible for carrying memory, articulating pain, and sustaining accountability work, while institutions retain the

ability to absorb each death as tragic but containable. Grief therefore matters here not only because it reveals the emotional cost of policing, but because it shows how institutions absorb injury without necessarily allowing it to become a sustained challenge to legitimacy.

THE UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF HARM

Fear and grief do not circulate randomly across stakeholders. They are patterned by institutional position and distributed unevenly across a racialized labor hierarchy of policing. Within this hierarchy, different groups are tasked with governing, enforcing, or enduring the consequences of police power. These positions shape not only material exposure to harm, but also the emotional conditions through which policing is experienced, interpreted, and reproduced. Emotional life is therefore not external to power. It is one of its primary mechanisms. Stakeholders do not simply disagree about policing; they feel it differently.

Across interviews, participants described the emotional consequences of policing not as isolated reactions but as enduring and cumulative forms of trauma that shape everyday life. One community participant described learning to "stay small" in public space to avoid attention, while another explained that "you never really relax," even in routine situations. A third reflected that "it's always in the back of your mind," describing a persistent awareness of risk that does not dissipate with time. These accounts were often accompanied by long pauses, lowered voices, and visible shifts in affect, underscoring that trauma was not only narrated but carried in the interview encounter itself.

These expressions of trauma were not limited to those who had directly experienced police violence. Several participants emphasized the impact of vicarious exposure, noting that widely circulated incidents, community narratives, and personal networks extended the reach of

trauma beyond individual encounters. As one participant explained, “even if it didn’t happen to you, it feels like it could,” while another described how “you carry it with you” after hearing about incidents affecting others. These accounts illustrate how trauma circulates collectively, becoming embedded in shared expectations about safety, vulnerability, and the limits of protection. In this sense, the emotional consequences of policing are not episodic but infrastructural, shaping how individuals interpret their environment and position themselves within it.

Brandon, a violence interrupter in Houston explains:

> “There are so many police departments in Houston. So many, every big thing has a police department. Metro Police, HISD Police, Harris County Sheriff, Harris County Constable, HPD. Bellaire is a city inside of Houston, inside of Harris County. Bellaire has their own police department. So, police presence in Harris County in Houston is huge and dynamic, and now you see more individuals from communities that they serve in that once grew up there. But the overview from the population that I work with of police is that they’re everywhere and sometimes they don’t get the job done.”

This passage is useful because it shows that the uneven distribution of harm is not only about direct violence. It is also about simultaneous overpresence and underprotection. Communities are highly policed while still feeling unsafe, unheard, or insufficiently protected. That dual condition is central to the racialized labor hierarchy traced in this dissertation.

For community stakeholders, fear is chronic, anticipatory, and tied to vulnerability. It reflects an ongoing exposure to surveillance, suspicion, and the possibility of violence. Aiyana, a grassroots organizer, similarly describes fear as embedded within ordinary interactions.

Encounters with police are charged with uncertainty and shaped by an awareness of how quickly situations can escalate and how limited options are for civilians on the other side.

> "They're the only one that can spare for their life and get away with bloody murder, and they the only one cannot do their job and still get a paycheck, so that's where I'm at with that."

The affective register here is contempt and accumulated disbelief. Police are not only dangerous. They are differently protected from consequence. The uneven distribution of harm is therefore not just about who is exposed to violence. It is also about whose suffering is recognized and whose impunity is institutionally maintained. Aiyana describes form of vigilance that extends beyond individual encounters, reorganizing how space is navigated and how safety is imagined. Fear, in this context, is infrastructural rather than episodic.

Sonya, a community organizer, describes how repeated exposure to police violence accumulates over time, creating what she understands as a collective trauma.

> "When they had the first hearing to get feedback from the community, they came from all over the community. That was the first time… that you had a citywide response… people came out to talk about how they were concerned about that happening to him and then telling their stories of how they had also been treated by the police officers. It didn't look like one minority population against the police. This was truly the residents of the City of Phoenix saying, 'What are we going to do about this?'"

Here Sonya describes how individual incidents are not isolated. They are understood as part of a broader pattern, reinforcing the sense that harm is both predictable and ongoing. The significance of this account is that trauma does not remain lodged in single encounters. It becomes socially organized through repetition, memory, and public retelling, shaping how communities interpret

both present risk and future contact with police. In this sense, the uneven distribution of harm is not only about who suffers most directly, but about how entire communities come to inhabit policing as an ongoing condition rather than an occasional event. These asymmetries do not stop at the boundary between police and community. They also shape the emotional lives of those tasked with enforcing the institution itself. As one former officer from Detroit, MI reflected, "It's funny, I wore the uniform. I was very proud to wear the uniform, and now the same uniform I wear makes me shake. In fact, I'm a little bit more afraid of the police now that I'm not a police officer than what I ever was when I was a police officer." The next section turns to Elijah as an exemplar case to show how policing requires an internal transformation of the enforcement subject, one that makes external dehumanization institutionally sustainable.

Elijah as Exemplar: Self-Dehumanization as Structural Necessity

The patterned distribution of fear and trauma across the racialized labor hierarchy helps explain how policing is lived differently across institutional positions, but it does not by itself explain how the hierarchy is reproduced in practice. To understand that reproduction, it is necessary to examine how those tasked with enforcement are themselves shaped by the institution. Elijah, a Black former police officer, serves as an exemplar case of this process. His narrative shows that policing requires not only the dehumanization of those subjected to police power, but also the partial dehumanization of those who carry it out. Self-dehumanization emerges in his account not as an incidental byproduct of police culture, but as a functional condition of police authority.

His account of entering and leaving policing offers one of the clearest articulations of moral injury in the chapter:

> "It's funny, I wore the uniform. I was very proud to wear the uniform, and now the same uniform I wear makes me shake. In fact, I'm a little bit more afraid of the police now that I'm not a police officer than what I ever was when I was a police officer. And the funny thing is, one of the students that I work with talked about joining the military because, as an immigrant, it made him feel like people would finally see him as an American. Well, when I joined the police department and I put on a blue uniform, I thought maybe finally someone would see me as a man, someone would finally see me as not being invisible. And really it is a form of invisibility that you feel as a person of color in this country. So I thought joining the ranks of the army, the police, that people would see me in a certain light. And I found that it was artificial. If anything, they didn't see me, they saw the uniform. They never saw me. In fact, that wasn't even me. It was a façade. It was this thing I was searching for that I'd never found."

This passage is analytically rich because it links recognition, fear, and alienation in one movement. The speaker enters policing seeking visibility and personhood, but the uniform does not humanize him. It displaces him. "They never saw me" marks not only racialized invisibility, but institutional substitution: the self is replaced by the role. The later fear of police, greater after leaving than while inside, is equally important. It shows that proximity to the institution did not resolve vulnerability. It temporarily mediated it. Once outside, what remained was intimate knowledge of how rapidly violence can arrive. That is why this account is not just about disillusionment. It is about moral rupture. The institution required him to inhabit a façade and subordinate parts of himself that could not be fully reconciled with what the role demanded.

From the outset, Elijah describes a profound shift in how he came to understand the role of police. Reflecting on what officers primarily do, he no longer frames policing as protection or service, but as the work of "agents to perpetuate the status quo," mobilized to defend institutional and economic interests. This is not merely a retrospective change in opinion. It is a moral reckoning with complicity. Elijah emerges as the clearest case of moral injury in the sample, revealing how policing can require not only the dehumanization of others, but the ongoing suppression of one's own moral intuition in order to remain within the institution. His narrative traces the gap between what he believed policing to be and what he came to recognize it required.

That recognition is especially significant given what drew him to the profession. Elijah does not describe entering policing out of a desire to dominate others. Rather, he describes the uniform as a route to visibility, legitimacy, and recognition. In a society structured by anti-Black devaluation, the badge appeared to offer access to a form of personhood otherwise denied. Yet this promise proved illusory. As he later reflects, people did not see him; they saw the uniform. The role did not secure his humanity but displaced it. His value became mediated through institutional function, and his moral self had to be subordinated to organizational expectations.

His account of life inside the department deepens this further:

> "It's interesting too, because on the department itself, there's a white–black divide. … I remember afternoons was pretty much all white… And then there are officers who you could ride the whole shift and they wouldn't talk to you… That's interesting, because that's the first time that I really fully experienced racism, is going to the [district redacted] of [city redacted], walking, I was fresh out of the academy, I'm brand new, I'm proud, and I'm saying, 'Good morning, sir. Good morning, sir,' and people are just

walking by me like I'm invisible. And I'm like, 'Man, it's the rookie treatment.' No, it wasn't the rookie treatment."

This quote shows that dehumanization is not only directed outward. It also structures labor, belonging, and recognition within policing itself. The speaker is not simply an enforcer who benefits from state power. He is also subjected to internal forms of racialized erasure. That tension helps explain why his later moral reckoning carries such weight. He is not describing an institution that fully includes him but one that recruits him into authority while denying full recognition even within it. That contradiction is central to the argument that self-dehumanization is structurally useful to police power.

Elijah's account makes clear that this transformation was not accidental. He describes training and police culture as organized around domination, emotional control, and interpretive discipline. Language is central to this process. People encountered by police are reduced to administrative and carceral categories such as "perp," a linguistic shift that strips away relational recognition and makes coercion easier to justify. At the same time, officers are taught not simply what to do, but how to narrate what they have done. Elijah recalls being instructed to say, "I feared for my life" after using force. This kind of scripting does more than prepare officers for legal scrutiny. It trains them to translate experience into institutionally legitimate emotion. Emotional authenticity is displaced by a narrative form calibrated to preserve the legitimacy of police violence.

His description of policing as a culture of domination makes this internal transformation explicit:

"Issues of dominance. So if you look at the structure of policing agencies. They're paramilitary, they're based upon domination. There is no equal footing and the police

> officers tend to, they're a part of that environment and they behave that way. They mirror that, the same structure in terms of leadership and in terms of the role that they play. So you start seeing yourself like the blue line or I'm the savior, I'm the only good thing between these horrible people. So the first thing you do when you go overseas and they're training you is to dehumanize the people. The same thing happens on the police department. People are referred to as perps. … So the first thing you do is dehumanize those people who are already dehumanized.

The emotional importance of this passage lies in how calmly and analytically it is delivered. Rather than dramatic denunciation, it offers retrospective clarity. The speaker is tracing a process by which domination becomes normalized, mirrored, and internalized. That reflective tone matters because it suggests the slow sedimentation of moral recognition rather than a single revelatory moment. Self-dehumanization appears here not as spectacular collapse, but as the routine narrowing of empathy required to make violence administratively and emotionally sustainable.

Leaving was not simply a career choice. It was a refusal to continue participating in a structure that required ongoing self-erasure. I do not treat moral injury as a universal response to policing. This case is analytically significant precisely because it shows with unusual clarity what institutional participation can require: the suppression of empathy, the subordination of moral intuition, and the inhabiting of organizational narratives as if they were authentic feeling.

Seen this way, policing requires a reorganization of feeling as much as behavior. Officers must learn to suppress forms of empathy that would inhibit coercion while adopting emotional scripts that authorize it. They must narrow the field of moral recognition in order to act. Self-dehumanization, in this sense, names a process through which officers become estranged from

their own ethical intuitions, emotional spontaneity, and identification with others. What is diminished is not only regard for civilians, but also access to parts of the self that would resist institutional violence. This is one way affective governance operates at the level of the self: by reorganizing which feelings can be recognized, acted upon, and sustained within the role of officer.

This contradiction becomes especially visible in Elijah's reflections on protest. When deployed as law enforcement, he experienced a profound internal split. Externally, he was positioned as an agent of containment and control. Internally, he identified with those in the street. He describes feeling disgust at police responses and recognizing the dehumanization underway. The significance of this moment is not simply that he disagreed with police conduct. It is that the role demanded action against his own moral recognition. His experience makes visible a central tension of policing: to function effectively within the institution, officers must be able to override ethical resistance when it conflicts with organizational purpose.

The costs of this suppression do not disappear when the uniform comes off. Elijah explains that he became more fearful of police after leaving the profession than he had been while serving in it. His insider knowledge of how quickly force can escalate produces hypervigilance rather than reassurance. The badge did not eliminate vulnerability; it temporarily mediated it. Once removed, the underlying conditions of exposure reappeared, now sharpened by intimate knowledge of how the institution works. This inversion is analytically important. It suggests that the officer role does not resolve the violence of policing even for those inside it. It merely organizes their relationship to that violence under conditions of conditional belonging.

That belonging, Elijah explains, is itself disciplinary. After leaving, he was labeled a "traitor" and socially excluded by former colleagues. The institution's demand for loyalty

extends beyond formal policy into moral and relational life. To remain inside requires silence, compliance, and continued alignment with organizational norms. To speak against the institution is to risk expulsion. This dynamic reinforces self-suppression by making belonging contingent on the willingness to subordinate one's moral voice to institutional solidarity.

Elijah's broader critique clarifies what this internal transformation ultimately serves. He describes policing as oriented toward the protection of property and institutional interests, characterizing officers as "violence workers." This language strips away the protective mythology that often surrounds policing and foregrounds its coercive function. But his account also shows that such work cannot be carried out consistently without reshaping the self of the officer who performs it. To enact violence as routine labor, officers must come to see themselves less as participants in a shared social world than as agents positioned above, against, or outside it.

His rejection of the "thin blue line" ideology captures this clearly. That ideology presents officers as the sole barrier between order and chaos, but Elijah shows that it also establishes an internal boundary. It requires officers to detach from broader human identification and align themselves exclusively with institutional authority. The line is therefore not just a symbolic division between police and public. It is a moral partition within the self, separating institutional duty from reciprocal human recognition.

Elijah ultimately frames his departure from policing in moral and existential terms. Leaving was not simply a career choice. It was a refusal to continue participating in a structure that required ongoing self-erasure. His narrative reveals that the production of police authority depends not only on the management of those subjected to coercion, but also on the remaking of those tasked with enforcing it. Through training, language, emotional scripting, and

organizational discipline, officers are shaped into subjects capable of carrying out dehumanization by first learning to disavow parts of their own humanity.

As an exemplar case, Elijah clarifies a broader analytic point: self-dehumanization is not peripheral to policing but foundational to its operation. Police power depends upon the production of a divided self, one able to suppress empathy, subordinate moral intuition, and inhabit institutional narratives as if they were authentic feeling. The dehumanization of civilians is thus enabled by a prior internal transformation of the officer. Policing reproduces itself not only by governing those it targets, but by reshaping those who enforce it.

Asymmetric Empathy and the Uneven Recognition of Humanity

If Elijah's account shows how policing restructures the emotional life of those who enforce it, the interviews more broadly show how these unequal emotional worlds are maintained across institutional positions. Affective misalignment persists not simply because stakeholders feel differently, but because their feelings are not equally recognized as credible, consequential, or fully human. Exposure to police violence is structured along intersecting lines of race, ethnicity, and gender, producing uneven vulnerability to state violence and shaping how individuals experience and interpret policing (Gaston, Fernandes, and DeShay 2021).I refer to one key mechanism of this reproduction as asymmetric empathy.

Asymmetric empathy describes the uneven distribution of emotional recognition within policing. Some forms of suffering are readily legible and elicit concern, while others are minimized, reframed, or rendered invisible. This unevenness is not reducible to individual prejudice or interpersonal failure. It is structured through institutional role, hegemonic narrative,

and the differential valuation of human life. Empathy is not absent within the system. It is organized asymmetrically.

Community stakeholders repeatedly describe this asymmetry in their encounters with police and other institutional actors. Fanta, reflecting on the aftermath of her son's death, recalls interactions in which her grief was met not with recognition but with suspicion, silence, and deflection. Attention shifted away from the harm she endured and toward rationalizations for it. In these moments, the original violence was compounded by a second injury: the demand that she prove the legitimacy of her own suffering. Her slowed speech and long pauses suggest not only grief, but exhaustion at having to continually assert that her pain should count.

Aiyana, a community organizer, makes the community side of this asymmetry unmistakable:

> "The thing is they keep violating us over and over again. It's the fact that, like I said, they get away with doing anything, and they get a slap on the wrist if they get anything. You can't be in one breath, like even in the George Floyd situation, you had some officers taking a knee and all that foolishness, I wasn't convinced. Then as soon as you on with the next one, then you go right to put your foot back on somebody else neck. It's disgusting. They keep killing us over and over again."

Here she describes a related dynamic in the interpretation of community anger and fear. Expressions of distress that emerge from repeated exposure to police violence are often read not as evidence of injury, but as hostility, exaggeration, or disorder. Her sharper tone and accelerated pacing when recounting these experiences underscore the frustration of being unheard within interactions that require emotional restraint from those who have already been denied

recognition. Community feeling is not simply ignored. It is often transformed into further grounds for dismissal.

She continues, discussing her experience with losing her brother to police violence:

> "I mean, for one, when my [relative] was brutally executed, [name redacted], in [year redacted], beat to death by 17 police officers, pepper sprayed, tased, tortured, we've been, I never asked for this, but when I learned that the way they get interviewed, they don't get interrogated. It was from the Officers' Bill of Rights, so immediately when I found out that they had these rights that place them above the law, and that they would literally have like 10 days before they could even give a statement, all this foolishness, so immediately I got on board and started going to [state capital redacted] and testifying, and different laws that were formed, so yeah."

This is one of the strongest passages because it joins grief, rage, and political recognition without flattening them into a single moral lesson. The affective movement is rapid. The brutal killing of a loved one does not remain private bereavement. It becomes recognition that the institution is structurally organized to protect itself. The phrase "I never asked for this" is especially important. It marks the involuntary conversion of personal loss into political labor. The speaker is not romanticizing activism. She is describing being forced into it by the discovery that the institution placed officers "above the law." This is not only evidence of grief. It is evidence of how lived harm can become political consciousness under conditions where empathy and accountability are structurally withheld.

By contrast, law enforcement participants describe their own fear as immediately intelligible, actionable, and institutionally supported. Elijah explains that officers are trained to interpret uncertainty as potential threat and to respond accordingly. Phrases such as "I feared for

my life" do not merely describe emotion; they activate legal and organizational legitimacy. Officer fear authorizes action. Community fear invites scrutiny. This is the central asymmetry.

This asymmetry extends into policymaking as well. Sariah's account illustrates how empathy can flow toward officers even in the context of widely recognized police violence. Reflecting on the murder of George Floyd, she emphasizes that she "didn't speak to one officer… that said… what that police officer was doing was right," quickly shifting to the reassurance that "that's not how we're trained." Her response centers institutional differentiation rather than structural critique.

When discussing the protests of 2020, she frames her emotional response as sadness rooted in perceived overgeneralization: "one bad apple doesn't mean that the rest of the police are bad." Here, the primary object of concern is not the conditions that produced police violence, but the reputational impact on law enforcement as a collective. Empathy is directed toward officers under scrutiny, while civilian harm is acknowledged but contained as exceptional.

Nonverbal patterns across interviews reinforce this divide. Law enforcement participants often speak in measured, controlled tones when discussing force, reflecting professional norms of composure and emotional regulation. Community participants, by contrast, frequently display visible strain, including pauses, vocal shifts, and moments of frustration or grief. These differences should not be misread as evidence that one group feels more deeply than another. Rather, they reveal unequal conditions under which emotion can be expressed and still be recognized as legitimate. Some emotional styles align with institutional credibility; others are coded as instability, threat, or excess.

Asymmetric empathy thus helps explain why affective misalignment endures. Stakeholders do not enter interaction with equal capacity to have their emotional realities

validated. Those positioned closer to institutional authority are afforded greater emotional credibility, while those positioned closer to harm must continually translate, contain, or defend their feelings in order to be heard at all. The result is not simply misunderstanding, but a patterned distortion in whose suffering counts as evidence of humanity. What makes this misalignment especially durable is that stakeholders may share concern with accountability without sharing an emotional or interpretive framework for what accountability is responding to. They are not only debating solutions. They are responding to different affective realities, different understandings of harm, and different judgments about whose suffering should count as evidence in the first place.

This dynamic is central to dehumanization in the interpersonal domain. Dehumanization is not only the denial of humanity through overt violence, disrespect, or objectification. It also operates through the unequal recognition of emotion itself. When some people's fear is treated as rational and others' fear as dangerous, when some grief is publicly affirmed and other grief is privatized or doubted, emotional recognition becomes a mechanism through which hierarchy is reproduced.

Situated within the racialized labor hierarchy, asymmetric empathy stabilizes domination by aligning emotional legitimacy with power. Those who govern and enforce are more readily recognized as emotionally intelligible subjects, while those who endure harm are more likely to be treated as unreliable narrators of their own experience. Empathy does not disappear under these conditions. It narrows toward positional vulnerability, making some forms of suffering more immediately legible than others.

Across stakeholder positions, fear is therefore not absent but differently attached. Officers fear bodily threat, disorder, and institutional delegitimation; community members fear

police violence, surveillance, and abandonment; policymakers fear fragmentation, political backlash, and governance failure. Because these fears attach to different objects, they do not generate reciprocal recognition. Instead, they organize empathy unevenly and help stabilize police power through patterned emotional alignment. At moments, cross-positional recognition does emerge, but such moments are fragile and rarely durable enough to reorganize the institutional conditions that produce misalignment in the first place.

Seen across these accounts, the patterned distribution of fear, Elijah's account of self-dehumanization, and the uneven recognition of suffering clarify the operation of affective misalignment in the interpersonal domain. Stakeholders do not simply interpret policing differently; they inhabit emotional worlds structured by unequal access to legitimacy, recognition, and protection. These divergences help explain why shared language so rarely produces shared understanding and why institutional stability persists despite ongoing harm.

Affective Governance and Reproduction of Police Power

The analysis across Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrates that police power is sustained not only through law, policy, or organizational practice, but through the coordination of meaning and emotion across institutional domains. The fractured lexicon reveals how shared language masks divergent interpretations of key terms such as reform, accountability, and respect. The racialized labor hierarchy shows how roles within policing are organized across governance, enforcement, and exposure to harm. Affective misalignment demonstrates that these positions are accompanied by distinct emotional realities that shape how policing is experienced and evaluated. Together, these dynamics point to a broader process through which power is reproduced. I refer to this process as affective governance.

Affective governance describes the structuring and distribution of emotional experience in ways that stabilize institutional authority under conditions of fragmentation. In the contemporary information environment, shared reality is increasingly unstable. Audiences encounter different streams of information, different narratives, and different interpretive frameworks, producing a thinner overlap in shared meaning. Under these conditions, public language continues to circulate even as consensus over its meaning erodes. Terms such as reform, accountability, and safety remain central to debate, but they function less as anchors of common understanding than as flexible signifiers to which stakeholders attach institutionally grounded meanings.

This dynamic produces what can be understood as false consensus. Stakeholders appear to agree at the level of language while diverging at the level of meaning. Policymakers interpret reform as procedural adjustment, law enforcement officials as professional adaptation, and community stakeholders as structural transformation. Because disagreement is masked by shared terminology, conflict becomes diffuse rather than coordinated. The absence of clear opposition allows institutional arrangements to persist even in the face of widespread critique.

At the same time, institutions actively participate in shaping the narratives through which they are understood. Police departments, for example, do not simply respond to public discourse. They engage in the production and management of it. As Tony Cheng demonstrates, policing institutions operate as narrative actors, shaping public perception through media strategy, information control, and the framing of events. This form of narrative production is not unique to policing but reflects a broader pattern across institutions that seek to manage legitimacy in highly mediated environments. Within this context, the hegemonic domain operates not as a site of unified meaning, but as a contested field in which institutions work to stabilize interpretation.

The racialized labor hierarchy organizes how individuals encounter these narratives in practice. Policymakers govern institutions and translate conflict into administrative response. Law enforcement officials enforce authority through direct interaction with the public. Community stakeholders experience the consequences of those interactions through surveillance, discipline, and violence. These positions shape not only material conditions, but also the emotional orientations through which policing is interpreted and judged.

Affective misalignment emerges from this structure. Because stakeholders occupy different positions within the hierarchy, they develop different emotional orientations toward policing. Community members experience fear as persistent vulnerability and grief as an ongoing condition. Law enforcement participants experience fear as situational threat and cultivate emotional control as a professional necessity. Policymakers engage these dynamics through abstraction, framing them as problems of governance, legitimacy, and institutional design. These orientations do not merely differ; they limit the possibility of mutual recognition.

Elijah's account makes visible how these dynamics are reproduced at the level of the individual. His experience demonstrates that participation in policing requires an internal reorganization of emotional response. The ability to enact authority depends on suppressing certain forms of empathy while adopting narratives that justify the use of force. This process illustrates how affective governance operates both across institutional positions and within individual actors.

At the institutional level, affective governance operates through identifiable moves. Officer fear is authorized as rational and actionable. Community fear is discounted, privatized, or recoded as disorder. Grief is transformed from public indictment into personal tragedy. Shared language masks incompatible meanings, allowing apparent consensus to coexist with substantive

divergence. Internal dissent is disciplined, while structural harm is translated into administrative problems to be managed rather than political conditions to be transformed. These mechanisms do not eliminate conflict. They organize it in ways that preserve institutional authority. As Sariah's account demonstrates, even reform-oriented discourse can function as affective repair, reinforcing institutional legitimacy by framing misconduct as aberrational and emphasizing internal correction rather than structural transformation.

The combined effect of fractured meaning, narrative production, and affective misalignment is the stabilization of institutional authority without the need for consensus. Stakeholders speak through shared language but do not converge on shared meaning. They experience the same institution through different emotional realities that are not easily reconciled. Institutional narratives shape interpretation, while emotional divergence limits the possibility of collective response. In this way, fragmentation itself becomes functional.

Understanding policing through the lens of affective governance clarifies why reform efforts that target isolated domains often fail. Policies may be revised, oversight structures expanded, and training protocols updated, yet the underlying organization of meaning and emotion remains intact. As long as language continues to mask disagreement, institutions retain the capacity to absorb critique. As long as emotional experience remains misaligned, harm is not collectively recognized in ways that produce unified demand.

The persistence of police power is therefore not paradoxical. It is an expected outcome of a system in which structure, meaning, and emotion are aligned in ways that diffuse opposition while maintaining legitimacy. Reform efforts that target only isolated domains may alter policy language, oversight procedures, or training protocols, yet leave intact the emotional and interpretive conditions through which police authority is reproduced. Transformation requires

more than institutional adjustment. It requires disrupting the fractured meanings, unequal emotional recognitions, and patterned affective alignments that make domination appear normal, necessary, and durable.

CHAPTER 6:

FROM POLICE REFORM TO AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT

Conclusion

This dissertation set out to answer a deceptively simple question: Why does police violence persist despite widespread public consensus calling for reform? Drawing on Patricia Hill Collins' Matrix of Domination and Gramscian theories of hegemony, I argued that the persistence of police power cannot be explained by policy failure alone. Instead, it must be understood as the product of mutually reinforcing domains of power, structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal, that together sustain a system increasingly vulnerable to authoritarian consolidation. By analyzing policing through these interlocking domains, this project reveals how reform efforts are repeatedly absorbed, redirected, or neutralized, even in moments of apparent crisis. Across six chapters, the dissertation demonstrates that police violence is not an aberration but a predictable outcome of institutional design, organizational culture, narrative legitimation, and affective misalignment.

To illustrate how these domains operate together, consider how a community demand for "accountability" moves through the system. Community stakeholders often invoke accountability to mean structural constraint, including consequences for misconduct, redistribution of resources, or reduced police presence. As this demand enters the policy arena, however, it is translated into administratively legible reforms such as additional training, revised use-of-force policies, or data reporting requirements. Within police organizations, these changes are further interpreted as procedural compliance, emphasizing adherence to updated protocols rather than substantive shifts in power or practice. At the level of everyday interaction, officers may understand these reforms as confirmation that existing practices are largely appropriate, requiring only minor

adjustment. What begins as a demand for structural transformation is thus reconstituted across domains into a series of technical and individualized interventions. This process does not represent a failure of reform implementation, but a mechanism of absorption through which the system incorporates critique while preserving its underlying structure.

This dynamic helps explain why public support for policing can persist even in moments of intense scrutiny and critique. Support is often conditional rather than absolute: people may condemn specific abuses, endorse reform, and still view police as necessary to maintaining order, responding to crises, or containing perceived disorder. Critique, then, does not lead to a lack of legitimacy. Instead, law enforcement institutions retain support by absorbing public outrage into procedural reform, symbolic responsiveness and palliative narratives; leaving the broader role of police unchanged. As Tony Cheng's work suggests, institutional actors can signal accountability and participation without relinquishing the underlying logics of enforcement, allowing reform itself to function as a mechanism of legitimacy (2023). Therefore, the institution can face widespread criticism while continuing to command public backing.

This also raises a deeper question about what should count as successful reform in the first place. If reform leaves intact the institutional arrangements that produce harm, while crime, trust, and accountability indicators remain largely unchanged, its success cannot be assumed simply because new policies were adopted or new oversight mechanisms were created. In this dissertation, reform appears less as a stable indicator of transformation than as a contested and politically mediated process whose meaning varies across stakeholder groups. What counts as success for one group may register as continuity, delay, or absorption for another. This is why the passage of reform should not be equated with the redistribution of power, the reduction of harm, or the creation of meaningful accountability. This ambiguity is especially visible in the

growing field of community violence intervention, where reductions in violence do not settle the contested question of who should receive credit for producing safety, nor do they erase the tension between police-centered and non-carceral approaches to public order. Although community violence intervention is not a central empirical focus of this dissertation, its growing prominence highlights a related tension identified throughout this study: even when violence declines, struggles remain over who is credited with producing safety and whether non-carceral approaches are allowed to displace the legitimacy historically granted to policing.

More recently, public attitudes toward coercive state institutions are shifting in ways that further underscore these contradictions. A recent poll found that roughly half of Americans support the abolition of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, signaling growing skepticism toward the legitimacy of state violence beyond policing alone (Rossell Hayes 2026). Yet even as public critique expands, institutional power remains intact. This gap between recognition and transformation is not accidental. It is the product of a system designed to absorb dissent while preserving authority. The conclusion brings these domains into conversation to show how they operate together, how their breakdown creates conditions for authoritarian expansion, and how those same fractures generate openings for resistance.

The rise of Immigration and Customs Enforcement as a centralized enforcement apparatus further clarifies this dynamic[21]. Unlike local policing, ICE operates with broader jurisdiction, fewer accountability constraints, and an explicit mandate tied to exclusion and removal. In this sense, it does not depart from the logic of policing analyzed in this dissertation, but intensifies it by extending discretionary enforcement, legal insulation, and dehumanizing

[21] See Appendix E for detailed documentation of ICE expansion, oversight decline, detention growth, and civil rights violations between 2025–2026.

practices into a more centralized and expansive form. What appears as a shift in institutional focus is better understood as a reconfiguration of the same underlying system of power.

The Matrix of Domination as an Integrated System Upholding the Racialized Labor Hierarchy

One central contribution of this dissertation is to demonstrate that the domains of the Matrix of Domination do not operate independently, but as an integrated system. Rather than functioning as discrete sites of power, the structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains reinforce one another, shaping how police power is organized, exercised, justified, and lived. The expansion of ICE provides a contemporary illustration of this integration, where structural insulation, disciplinary scaling, hegemonic justification, and interpersonal harm converge at the federal level (see Appendix E).

The structural domain, examined through legal history and federalism, sets the conditions under which police power operates. Constitutional doctrine, qualified immunity, collective bargaining protections, fragmented jurisdictional authority, and federal deference to local control diffuse responsibility and weaken external constraint. These legal arrangements make it difficult to assign blame or impose consequences when harm occurs. This helps answer the comparative question of whether federalism is necessary to the broader argument. Centralized states such as France may also experience policing crises, so federalism is not the only institutional path to coercive policing. But in the United States it is especially consequential because it disperses authority across overlapping jurisdictions, weakens clear lines of accountability, and allows police power to remain locally exercised while nationally legitimized. In contemporary politics, this same structure enables renewed federal tolerance for aggressive policing, reinforcing an existing legal architecture that already shields law enforcement from accountability.

The disciplinary domain translates this structural insulation into everyday practice. Police departments operate as semi-autonomous organizations with internal cultures that prioritize loyalty, discretion, and officer safety. Discipline remains largely inward-facing. Misconduct is addressed through internal investigation, retraining, or reassignment rather than external sanction. Reform in this domain often takes procedural form, for example body cameras, training programs, and revised protocols, without altering incentives or redistributing power.

The hegemonic domain legitimizes these arrangements through language and narrative. Shared terms such as reform, accountability, and respect circulate widely while carrying divergent meanings across stakeholder groups. This fractured consensus stabilizes policing rather than undermining it. Critique is absorbed into bureaucratic processes that signal responsiveness without producing transformation. Disagreement is managed through language rather than resolved through structural change.

What Chapters 4 and 5 make clear is that reform and accountability do not function as shared solutions across stakeholder groups, even when they appear to name a common concern. Community stakeholders most often attached accountability to consequences for harm, recognition of suffering, and meaningful transformation in the conditions that make violence possible. Law enforcement participants more often framed accountability in terms of procedural fairness, internal discipline, and the protection of professional legitimacy. Policymakers often occupied an intermediate position, invoking accountability as oversight, transparency, or administrative adjustment while remaining divided over how far institutional change should go. Reform operated similarly. Across groups, the term signaled responsiveness and improvement, but what counted as improvement varied sharply. These differences help explain why policing

can be widely criticized while still remaining institutionally stable: the appearance of consensus obscures the absence of shared meaning beneath it.

The interpersonal domain reveals how these systems are lived and felt. Stakeholders do not simply disagree about policing; they experience it through incompatible emotional frameworks. Police describe fear, danger, and split-second decision-making. Community members describe grief, humiliation, and cumulative harm. These emotional divides individualize suffering and obscure its structural origins. Trauma becomes personal rather than collective, and violence is reframed as misfortune rather than institutional design.

Together, these domains form a single mutually constitutive system. The structural domain organizes police power. The disciplinary domain enforces it. The hegemonic domain justifies it. The interpersonal domain normalizes it emotionally. Reform efforts that target only one domain fail because power reappears through the others. Meaningful change requires confronting this system as an integrated architecture rather than a set of isolated problems. Changes in one domain are absorbed and reconfigured through the others, allowing the system to adapt without fundamentally transforming.

This adaptive capacity is also important to understanding organizational inertia. Police institutions do not persist simply by resisting critique outright. They also persist by incorporating the language of reform, accountability, and innovation in ways that preserve underlying relations of power. In the contemporary moment, this adaptive process increasingly operates through digital and mediated forms, including social media messaging, public relations campaigns, and emerging data-driven or AI-assisted tools that can be framed as neutral, efficient, or reform-oriented while leaving core enforcement logics intact. These developments do not replace older forms of institutional protection. They extend them, allowing policing to appear modernized and

responsive even when substantive redistribution of power has not occurred.

Federalism and the Architecture of Authoritarianism

This dissertation locates the contemporary drift toward authoritarianism not in a sudden rupture, but in the long-standing failures of American federalism. Designed to balance local autonomy with national oversight, federalism has instead produced a fragmented landscape of authority with few meaningful checks on state violence. Contemporary patterns of state violence are also shaped by intergenerational harms rooted in earlier regimes of racial terror, which continue to structure how communities experience and interpret state authority (Gaston 2021). These patterns are not new but reflect the durability of regional racial regimes, as historical institutional arrangements rooted in slavery and Jim Crow continue to shape contemporary inequality and state governance (Baker 2022). Legal insulation, jurisdictional fragmentation, and deference to local control allow police departments to operate with extraordinary autonomy. Federal intervention remains rare, slow, and reactive.

This point should also be understood comparatively. Federalism is not the only institutional arrangement through which coercive or unaccountable policing can emerge, as centralized states such as France have also faced serious policing crises. The argument here is narrower and specific to the U.S. case: within the American context, federalism functions as the structural domain because it organizes how police power is dispersed, insulated, and contested across overlapping levels of governance. It is this fragmentation, rather than decentralization in the abstract, that makes accountability especially difficult when harm is nationally visible but legally and administratively local.

These conditions create fertile ground for authoritarian consolidation, particularly when executive power exploits institutional ambiguity. Crisis conditions can accelerate this logic, as institutions expand coercive authority while framing such expansion as necessary or protective (Lackey et al. 2025). The recent political moment did not invent authoritarian policing; it accelerated existing tendencies. Research on carceral responses to COVID-19 shows that crises do not simply expose institutional failure but can be actively leveraged to intensify punitive control, with incarcerated individuals describing pandemic governance as an expansion of coercive power under the guise of care (Lackey et al. 2025). Federal encouragement of aggressive enforcement, the erosion of protest protections, and the expansion of discretionary policing all rely on preexisting structural vulnerabilities.

Authoritarianism, in this framework, does not emerge through the suspension of democracy, but through its procedural hollowing. Coercive practices normalized at the margins, particularly in racially marginalized communities, are extended outward and upward. Policing thus functions not only as an instrument of governance, but as a mechanism through which democratic erosion becomes operational. The rapid expansion of federal immigration enforcement demonstrates how these structural conditions can be mobilized quickly, scaling coercive capacity while limiting oversight (see Appendix E).

Dehumanization, Trauma and the Individualization of Collective Harm

One of the most consequential findings of this dissertation is the systematic individualization of collective harm. Community members experience policing as cumulative, as an ongoing exposure to surveillance, humiliation, and violence, yet institutional narratives recast these experiences as isolated incidents or personal grievances. This individualization obscures

structural causality, delegitimizes collective claims, and fragments the possibility of sustained political response. This dynamic reflects what scholars describe as necropolitical governance, in which institutions manage life and death through conditions of exposure and neglect, often intensified during moments of crisis (Mbembe 2003; Lackey et al. 2025).

Emotional responses such as grief and fear are treated as excessive or subjective, while institutional fear is normalized and operationalized. The result is not only dehumanization, but a reorganization of recognition itself, in which suffering is acknowledged rhetorically but denied political consequence. Authoritarianism thrives under these conditions not through unity, but through fragmentation, where shared experience fails to become shared understanding. In federal detention systems, this individualization is especially visible, where systemic patterns of harm are routinely processed as isolated cases rather than institutional outcomes.

Resistance Within and Beyond the Matrix

Power is never total. The Matrix of Domination contains contradictions that generate openings for resistance. Community resistance emerges as both counter-hegemonic and relational. Grassroots organizing, mutual aid, civilian oversight advocacy, and narrative reframing challenge dominant meanings while rebuilding social bonds fractured by state violence.

These practices resist not only coercion, but isolation. They reject the individualization of harm and insist on collective accountability. Resistance does not occur outside the matrix, but within it, leveraging the interpersonal domain to contest hegemonic narratives, pressure disciplinary systems, and expose structural failures. While constrained, these efforts reveal that legitimacy is neither fixed nor fully controlled by the state.

Contributions and Implications

This dissertation makes several contributions to the study of policing, state violence, and democratic governance. Theoretically, it advances the Matrix of Domination as a dynamic, multi-domain framework, demonstrating how forms of power interact to sustain police authority. Empirically, it integrates narrative and affective analysis across stakeholder groups, showing how meaning and emotion function as mechanisms of power. Conceptually, it reframes reform failure as a process of absorption and containment rather than absence. Finally, it reconceptualizes authoritarianism as an emergent condition produced through institutional fragmentation, narrative legitimation, and affective misalignment.

These findings challenge dominant reform approaches that prioritize procedural or technocratic solutions. Policy change without structural transformation reproduces existing power relations. Federalism enables authoritarian drift by dispersing responsibility and limiting accountability. False consensus obscures disagreement, preventing coordinated resistance. The individualization of harm fragments collective response.

Addressing police violence therefore requires multi-domain intervention. Structural reform, organizational transformation, narrative disruption, and affective realignment must occur simultaneously. Without this, reform risks reproducing the conditions it seeks to dismantle.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study relies on interview data rather than direct observation, prioritizing meaning and affect over behavioral analysis. While well suited to capturing how stakeholders interpret and narrate policing, interviews reflect articulated experience rather than action in situ. The

sample is analytically, not statistically, representative, and is designed to illuminate patterns of meaning rather than support population-level inference. Future research should extend these findings across different regions, institutional contexts, and time periods, particularly in rural jurisdictions, smaller municipalities, and areas with distinct political cultures.

The analysis captures perspectives at a specific historical moment shaped by the aftermath of the 2020 racial justice uprisings and the political climate of the early 2020s. Because interviews were conducted cross-sectionally, this study does not track how individual narratives or emotional orientations evolve over time. Longitudinal research is therefore necessary to examine how meaning and affect shift in response to policy change, electoral cycles, or renewed political crisis.

In addition, the project foregrounds the perspectives of individuals already engaged in debates over policing, including officials, officers, organizers, and subject experts. Less visible populations—particularly those who avoid institutional contact due to fear, marginalization, or political disengagement—are less directly represented. This reflects a broader challenge in research on state power and points to the need for alternative methodological strategies capable of accessing more hidden or disengaged populations.

Future research should build on this work in several directions. First, scholars should examine how digital media and algorithmic infrastructures shape the hegemonic domain. While this study identifies media narratives as influential, further work is needed to understand how social media platforms, recommendation systems, and misinformation ecosystems intensify affective polarization and stabilize false consensus around policing. Second, comparative and international research could clarify whether the dynamics identified here are specific to the U.S. federalist system or characteristic of democratic backsliding more broadly. Analysis across

federal and unitary systems would help illuminate how institutional design shapes authoritarian vulnerability.

Third, future studies should examine community-based counter-hegemonic practices in greater depth. This dissertation identifies resistance as relational and affective as well as political, but additional research is needed to determine which organizing strategies successfully disrupt narrative fragmentation and sustain collective trust over time. Participatory and longitudinal approaches would be especially valuable in this regard.

Fourth, more research is needed on intra-institutional dissent among law enforcement and policymakers. Examining how internal critics navigate professional risk, moral injury, and organizational retaliation would shed light on the possibilities and limits of reform from within. Finally, scholars should continue to theorize the emotional dimensions of governance. This study demonstrates that affective misalignment is central to the reproduction of police power; future work should further examine how emotions such as fear, grief, exhaustion, and moral certainty are produced, managed, and politicized across institutions.

Social Movements and the Limits of Transformation Across Domains

Social movements are often positioned as the primary mechanism through which democratic societies confront injustice and demand institutional change. Moments of mass mobilization, such as the protests following the murder of George Floyd, are frequently interpreted as evidence of collective will and the potential for transformation. Yet the persistence of police violence despite widespread protest reflects how each domain of power absorbs, redirects, and limits the transformative capacity of collective action. Even unprecedented visibility into police violence did not produce shared meaning or sustained consensus around

reform. Instead, protest intensified fragmentation within the hegemonic domain, multiplying interpretations of shared demands.

Within the structural domain, legal and political institutions constrain protest through both formal and informal mechanisms. Historical evidence shows that the state has long surveilled, infiltrated, and disrupted movements perceived as threatening, most notably through programs such as COINTELPRO (Church Committee 1976; Cunningham 2004; Bloom and Martin 2012; Churchill and Vander Wall 1990). Contemporary forms of constraint include laws that restrict protest activity, criminalize collective action, and expand enforcement capacity through intergovernmental coordination and immigration enforcement regimes (ACLED 2020; ACLU 2026). Repression is not episodic but patterned, with Black-led movements facing disproportionate surveillance and coercion even when controlling for size and tactics (Davenport et al. 2011; Earl 2003). These constraints shape the terrain of protest, limiting its ability to produce sustained institutional change.

The disciplinary domain translates these constraints into everyday practices that manage dissent. Law enforcement agencies deploy specialized units, surveillance technologies, and crowd-control tactics to regulate protest activity, often justified through appeals to public safety and order (Gillham, Edwards, and Noakes 2013; Vitale 2017). During the summer of 2020, these practices escalated across jurisdictions, including the use of tear gas, rubber bullets, and mass arrest, as well as federal interventions in local protest contexts (Amnesty International 2020; Hart 2021). At the same time, organizational priorities and resource allocation reinforce the expansion of policing capacity, even in the face of reform demands (Soss and Weaver 2017; Ray 2022). Disciplinary practices do not simply respond to protest. They shape its outcomes by reinforcing the institutional power that protest seeks to challenge.

Within the hegemonic domain, protest operates as a site of competing meaning-making rather than unified political articulation. Media representations, political rhetoric, and institutional discourse reframe protest in ways that obscure underlying demands and diffuse political clarity (Gitlin 1980; Hall et al. 1978). Shared terms such as reform, accountability, and safety circulate widely but carry divergent meanings across stakeholders. Racial disparities in enforcement are not incidental but systematically produced through policing practices, even as dominant narratives frame these outcomes as neutral or crime-driven (Gaston 2019). Protest slogans such as "Defund the Police" travel across domains, yet are interpreted through incompatible institutional logics. For some, defunding signals resource redistribution and a reimagining of public safety. For others, it is reduced to budgetary adjustment or framed as a threat to order. This fragmentation produces the appearance of consensus while masking deep disagreement, allowing institutions to claim responsiveness without altering underlying structures. Rather than producing convergence, protest multiplies meanings, enabling hegemonic adaptation through the absorption and rearticulation of critique (Cheng 2020; Cobbina 2019).

At the interpersonal level, participation in social movements is shaped by risk, vulnerability, and emotional strain. Protest exposes individuals to physical harm, surveillance, arrest, and social retaliation (della Porta 2013). Empirical evidence from the 2020 protests documents widespread injury, arrest, and psychological strain among participants (Chaudhary and Richardson 2022). At the same time, broader conditions of mistrust and fragmentation limit the capacity for sustained collective engagement. Fear, exhaustion, and division weaken the relational foundations necessary for durable organizing. While protest can generate moments of solidarity and moral clarity, these conditions are often difficult to sustain over time (Jasper 2011; Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001).

These dynamics demonstrate that the limits of social movements are not rooted in a lack of participation or awareness. They are produced through the interaction of structural repression, disciplinary enforcement, hegemonic fragmentation, and interpersonal strain. Social movements remain persistent, yet they operate within a system that absorbs critique while preserving institutional stability. Recognizing these constraints is not a call to abandon collective action, but to reimagine it in ways that confront power across domains simultaneously.

A CALL TO ACTION AMIDST COLLAPSE

This dissertation does not call for agreement. It calls for engagement. It insists that meaningful change requires confronting power across domains, refusing false consensus, and rebuilding the relational foundations necessary for collective resistance. Authoritarianism does not advance through force alone. It consolidates through fragmentation, dehumanization, and the erosion of shared meaning. When people are isolated into individualized fear, privatized grief, and asymmetric empathy, domination becomes durable without requiring overt consent.

Resisting this trajectory requires more than policy reform or procedural adjustment. It requires reconstituting the social conditions under which collective recognition, accountability, and solidarity become possible. The struggle over policing is therefore not simply a dispute over tactics or institutions. It is a struggle over democracy itself: over who is protected, who is rendered expendable, and whose suffering counts as politically consequential. This work is offered not as a final word, but as an invitation—to listen across difference, to resist emotional containment, and to imagine forms of collective life not organized around domination.

Hope for Liberation

Hope, in this framework, is not optimism. It is not the belief that institutions will self-correct or that harm will dissipate through incremental reform alone. Hope is instead grounded in recognition: the recognition that domination is actively produced, emotionally sustained, and therefore contestable. If fear, grief, and dehumanization are organized, then they can also be reorganized.

Liberation does not emerge from denying collapse, but from naming it clearly. The narratives analyzed in this dissertation reveal not apathy or confusion, but widespread moral clarity constrained by unequal power and affective misalignment. People know harm is systemic. What is missing is not awareness, but the conditions under which collective response feels possible and safe. Hope lies in rebuilding those conditions, not in waiting for institutional benevolence. Hope, in this sense, is not passive. It is a commitment to transforming the conditions that make collective action possible, even under constraint.

Actionable Movements Away from Domination and Toward Humanity

Moving away from domination requires intervening at the same levels where power is currently sustained. Structurally, this means confronting legal and institutional arrangements that insulate police from accountability and concentrate authority upward. Disciplinarily, it requires disrupting practices that normalize coercion, surveillance, and discretionary harm. Hegemonically, it demands challenging narratives that equate safety with force and reform with legitimacy maintenance. The expansion of immigration enforcement demonstrates the urgency of such multi-level interventions, as coercive capacity continues to scale beyond traditional policing institutions (See Appendix E).

At the interpersonal level, however, change begins with affect. It requires refusing the privatization of grief, resisting the normalization of fear, and rejecting emotional hierarchies that render some suffering ordinary and others exceptional. This includes creating spaces where harm can be named collectively, where grief is politicized rather than managed, and where empathy is redistributed rather than rationed. Such practices do not replace structural change; they make it possible.

This includes expanding non-carceral forms of safety, redirecting resources away from enforcement toward community-based infrastructure, and building institutions capable of responding to harm without relying on coercion. It also requires strengthening legal accountability mechanisms that can operate across jurisdictions, limiting the ability of enforcement agencies to evade consequence through fragmentation. Without such shifts, affective and narrative transformation alone cannot disrupt the structural reproduction of harm.

Coalition Building and Community Re-Orientation

Coalition building is not a matter of consensus. It is a matter of alignment. The findings in this dissertation show that people across positions experience policing as volatile, harmful, and emotionally destabilizing, even as institutions distribute recognition and protection unevenly. These shared exposures, though asymmetrically experienced, provide potential grounds for coalition—if emotional misalignment is confronted rather than denied.

Community re-orientation requires shifting away from individualized survival strategies toward collective care and mutual accountability. This includes centering those most harmed by policing while refusing narratives that frame solidarity as naïve or dangerous. It also requires

unsettling professional and institutional identities that depend on emotional distance, replacing them with practices rooted in responsibility rather than control.

Coalitions capable of resisting domination will not emerge from agreement on every demand. They will emerge from shared refusal: refusal to accept expendability, refusal to normalize coercion, and refusal to allow fear to dictate the limits of political imagination.

The racialized labor hierarchy examined in this dissertation is not inevitable. It is reproduced through choices: legal, institutional, narrative, and emotional. Because it is produced, it can be undone. But undoing it requires confronting not only what policing does, but what it makes feel possible. The work of liberation is therefore both structural and relational, political and affective It begins where domination is lived and moves outward toward forms of collective life grounded in dignity, accountability, and shared humanity.

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APPENDIX A:

RSF INTERVIEW GUIDE

Protests, Police Reform, and Police–Community Relations

This semi-structured interview guide was used across stakeholder groups, with minor probes tailored to participants' institutional roles. Questions were designed to elicit narratives rather than fixed responses, allowing participants to define key terms in their own language. The guide was used flexibly, with follow-up questions and probes introduced as needed.

Introduction and Consent Script

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. This conversation is part of a larger, nationwide research project examining the relationship between protest, policing, and police reform in the United States. While the broader project analyzes quantitative trends across cities, this interview focuses on understanding how these dynamics are experienced and interpreted on the ground.

Your participation is voluntary. You may decline to answer any question or withdraw from the interview at any time without penalty. All information you share will be kept confidential, and identifying details will be removed from transcripts unless you explicitly grant permission otherwise. With your consent, this interview will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Section I: Police–Community Relations

1. What do you see as the primary role of the police?
2. How do you think people in your community view the police?
3. How would you describe police–community relations in *[CITY]*?
4. What do you see as the major barriers to improving police–community relations?
5. What steps, if any, do you think could help reduce those barriers?
6. Do you think the media plays a role in shaping how communities view police?
7. Do you think media portrayals of police are fair? Why or why not?
    - *Probe:* Are there specific narratives, images, or platforms you associate with fairness or unfairness?

Section II: Protest

8. When you think about protest activity in *[CITY]*, which organizations or groups come to mind?
9. How would you describe these groups and their goals?
10. In what ways do these groups typically engage in protest?
    - *Probe:* Street protests, public meetings, legislative advocacy, media engagement.
11. Thinking about high-profile protest events (e.g., Summer 2020 racial justice protests; January 6), what stands out to you about those moments?
12. Do you think these protests have changed policing in the United States? If so, how?
13. Have these protests changed how you personally view policing?
14. Have they changed how the public treats or views you or people in your role?
15. Were there any unintended consequences of these protest movements that you noticed?
16. What are your thoughts on calls to *defund the police*?

17. What do you think about movements such as *Blue Lives Matter* or *Back the Blue*?
18. What are your thoughts on calls for police abolition?
19. Have you personally participated in or observed protests in the past five years?
    - *If yes:* What was that experience like?

Section III: Police Reform

20. Do you think police reform is necessary? Why or why not?
21. Are there specific incidents in *[CITY]* that you think prompted calls for reform?
22. How would you describe what police reform looks like in *[CITY]*?
23. Do you think meaningful reform is currently taking place? Can you give examples?
24. Have there been barriers to passing police reform legislation in *[CITY]*?
25. Have there been barriers to implementing reform once legislation passes?
26. Are there reforms you believe are needed but have not yet occurred?

Specific Policy Probes

What are your views on reforms that would:

- Require officers to exhaust alternatives before using deadly force?
- Ban chokeholds or strangleholds?
- Establish community oversight or civilian review boards?
- Require de-escalation where possible?
- Require body-worn cameras and continuous activation?
- Require officers to intervene in cases of excessive force?
- Establish or formalize a use-of-force continuum?

- Require reporting of all uses or threats of force?
- Ban shooting at moving vehicles?

Section IV: Demographic and Background Information

27. Where are you currently employed?
28. What is your job title or role?
29. Are you, your partner, or someone close to you currently in or formerly in law enforcement?
30. How do you describe your race or ethnicity?
31. What is your gender identity?
32. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
33. How old are you?
34. What is your ZIP code or neighborhood?

Closing Questions

35. Is there anything related to protest, policing, or reform that we did not discuss but you think is important?
36. Are there other individuals you recommend we speak with regarding protest or police reform in *[CITY]*?

- *Probes:* Elected officials, police officers, activists, community leaders, oversight board members.

APPENDIX B:

STAKEHOLDER CONSOLIDATION INTO ANALYTIC CATEGORIES

This dissertation draws on 65 in-depth interviews conducted with 66 individuals occupying a wide range of roles related to policing, governance, and community life. While participants were initially categorized into five descriptive role types during data collection: law enforcement, elected officials, activists/organizers, nonprofit leaders, and subject experts, these categories were later consolidated into three analytic stakeholder groups for purposes of narrative and affective analysis: Law Enforcement, Policymakers, and Community Stakeholders. This consolidation was guided by analytic considerations rather than demographic or identity-based criteria. Because the project examines power as relational and structurally organized, stakeholder groupings were constructed based on participants' institutional position, proximity to formal authority, and relationship to the structural, disciplinary, and interpersonal domains of policing. Profiles were reviewed for each participant to assess role, organizational affiliation, decision-making authority, and relationship to police power, ensuring consistent and theoretically grounded classification.

Law Enforcement

The Law Enforcement stakeholder group includes active-duty officers, supervisors, administrators, and retired personnel whose professional roles involved enforcing law, shaping departmental culture, or managing internal discipline. Participants in this group were directly embedded in the disciplinary domain of policing and, in many cases, had experience interacting with oversight mechanisms, consent decrees, or reform initiatives from within departments. Consolidating these participants into a single analytic group allowed for examination of how

occupational identity, professional norms, and internal accountability frameworks shape narratives of legitimacy, reform, and responsibility.

Policymakers

The Policymakers stakeholder group includes elected officials and staffers at the local, state, and federal levels whose roles involve legislation, budgetary oversight, policy design, or institutional governance related to policing. Although participants varied in seniority and jurisdiction, they shared a common relationship to the structural domain of power, where authority is exercised through lawmaking, regulation, and administrative process. Grouping these participants together facilitated analysis of how governance logics, institutional constraints, and political accountability shape narratives of reform, oversight, and legitimacy.

Community Stakeholders

The Community Stakeholders group includes grassroots organizers, clergy, nonprofit leaders, journalists, oversight board members, legal advocates, and subject experts whose primary relationship to policing occurred outside formal state authority. While this group encompassed diverse professional backgrounds, participants shared a common positionality relative to police power: they were most often situated in the interpersonal domain, experiencing policing through direct contact, advocacy, observation, or community accountability work. Consolidating these participants into a single analytic category enabled examination of how lived experience, moral claims, and collective memory shape narratives of harm, justice, and dignity.

Purpose and Analytic Relevance: The categorization of stakeholders used in this study reflects differences in institutional role and systematic differences in how participants interpret key concepts related to policing. These differences are patterned and consistent. They align with

institutional position and support the analytic distinction between governance, enforcement, and community-based actors. Participants do not simply occupy different roles. They rely on different interpretive frameworks that shape how policing is understood, evaluated, and contested.

Shared Language and Divergent Meaning

Across interviews, participants relied on a common set of terms, including reform, accountability, safety, and respect. These terms circulated widely across stakeholder groups but did not carry stable meanings. Interpretation shifted in consistent ways based on institutional location. This pattern produces interpretive divergence. Common language creates the appearance of agreement, but underlying meanings remain distinct.

A. Reform

Participants defined reform in ways that reflect their institutional position. These differences reflect distinct orientations to the purpose and limits of change.

- Policymakers described reform as procedural and incremental. Their accounts emphasized feasibility, policy design, and institutional constraint. Reform appeared as adjustment within existing systems.
- Law enforcement participants framed reform through professional practice. Reform referred to training, policy clarification, and resource allocation. It was bounded by the need to maintain operational effectiveness and organizational continuity.
- Community stakeholders defined reform as structural transformation. Reform was linked to accountability for harm, redistribution of power, and fundamental change. Incremental approaches were often described as insufficient or symbolic.

B. Accountability:

Definitions of accountability followed a similar pattern. Each definition reflects a different threshold for what counts as a response to harm.

- Policymakers emphasized oversight mechanisms, reporting structures, and procedural compliance. Accountability appeared as monitoring and documentation.
- Law enforcement participants focused on internal discipline and adherence to policy. Accountability was framed as organizational self-regulation.
- Community participants defined accountability as consequence. This included punishment, recognition of harm, and meaningful redress.

C. Respect:

Interpretations of respect also diverged across groups. These meanings overlap at the level of language but differ in substance and expectation.

- Law enforcement participants associated respect with compliance, cooperation, and recognition of authority.
- Community participants described respect as dignity, recognition, and freedom from dehumanization.
- Policymakers framed respect as mutual civility and the restoration of public trust.

Implications: These patterns show that stakeholder categories are both organizational and interpretive. Differences across groups are structured rather than incidental. Institutional position shapes how participants define problems, evaluate solutions, and assign responsibility. Shared

language does not indicate shared understanding. It allows disagreement to persist without direct confrontation. This interpretive divergence supports the analytic decision to group participants by institutional position. Governance, enforcement, and community-based actors are differently situated within the structure of policing and oriented toward it through distinct systems of meaning.

APPENDIX C:

MEMO EXCERPTS

C.1. Narrative Analysis Memo: "Reform"

The following excerpt is drawn from an analytic memo produced during the narrative coding phase. It is included to illustrate how stakeholder narratives were compared, theorized, and linked to hegemonic processes. The excerpt represents a moment of analytic synthesis rather than an exhaustive account of memo-writing.

Analytic Memo Excerpt: Reform as Hegemonic Containment

Across stakeholder interviews, *reform* emerges as a central but unstable concept, functioning less as a shared roadmap for change than as a site of narrative struggle. While all stakeholder groups agree that reform is necessary, they attach sharply different meanings to the term, reflecting their position within the institutional hierarchy of policing. Rather than converging toward a common vision, reform operates as a symbol of legitimacy that allows institutions to acknowledge crisis while preserving existing power relations.

Community stakeholders consistently define reform as structural transformation. For these participants, reform requires redistributing resources away from policing, enforcing consequences for misconduct, dismantling legal protections that shield officers from accountability, and confronting the cultural logics that normalize harm. Reform without enforcement or outcome change is widely described as *performance*—a cycle of symbolic gestures that absorb public outrage without altering lived conditions. In this narrative frame, reform is inseparable from justice, truth-telling, and material change.

In contrast, law enforcement narratives frame reform as procedural adjustment and professional self-regulation. Officers often equate reform with new policies, training modules, technology, or resource expansion. While some officers articulate reform as internal honesty or cultural correction, the dominant framing positions reform as externally imposed, reactive, and frequently disconnected from operational realities. Reform is simultaneously dismissed as symbolic and embraced as an opportunity to secure additional resources or protect institutional autonomy. This dual framing allows officers to critique reform while maintaining the legitimacy of the profession.

Policymakers occupy an intermediary narrative position. Their accounts define reform through the language of governance, feasibility, and institutional process. Reform is described as legislation, oversight boards, training mandates, and consent decrees—mechanisms that signal responsiveness to public demands while often lacking enforcement power. Policymakers routinely acknowledge that culture undermines implementation, yet continue to narrate reform as a policy problem rather than a redistribution of authority. In this sense, reform becomes managerial: a balancing act between institutional preservation and public expectation.

Analytically, these narratives reveal reform as a hegemonic concept in the Gramscian sense. Reform functions as a form of *passive revolution*: a managed process of limited change that absorbs resistance while stabilizing the underlying structure of police power. The same word circulates across stakeholder groups, producing the appearance of consensus, but its meaning shifts according to positional interest. Communities invoke reform as liberation; institutions deploy it as preservation. This semantic flexibility allows reform discourse to legitimize the status quo by promising progress without committing to transformation.

The convergence around reform as *necessary* masks deeper disagreement over who defines progress and whose harms count. Reform thus operates as a technology of consent, translating moral demands for justice into bureaucratic form. Rather than resolving conflict, reform narratives sustain it—ensuring that calls for change are continuously acknowledged, managed, and deferred without threatening the durability of police power.

C.2. Affective Analysis Memo: "Fear and Dehumanization"

The following excerpt is drawn from an affective analytic memo developed during the audio-based coding phase. It is included to illustrate how emotional registers were identified, compared across stakeholder groups, and theorized as mechanisms within the interpersonal and hegemonic domains. The excerpt reflects analytic synthesis rather than raw observation.

Analytic Memo Excerpt: Affective Misalignment and the Emotional Infrastructure of Policing

Across community stakeholder interviews, fear emerges as the dominant affective register shaping how policing is experienced and interpreted. This fear is not episodic but ambient, structuring everyday decision-making, civic participation, and perceptions of safety. Participants consistently describe fear not only during moments of direct police contact, but in anticipation of encounters, during protest, and in ordinary civic spaces such as city council meetings. Fear is narrated as bodily—manifesting as panic, vigilance, accelerated heart rate, grief responses, and withdrawal—and as political, shaping whether individuals engage with or avoid institutions altogether.

Importantly, community fear is paired with grief. Participants who have lost family members to police violence describe grief as cumulative and enduring, rather than resolved through policy

change or public acknowledgment. Grief resurfaces during media coverage, subsequent police killings, and public discourse that questions victims' humanity. In these narratives, grief functions as both evidence and indictment: proof of harm and a measure of institutional failure. Participants reject calls for civility or patience, framing such demands as emotional invalidation rather than reconciliation.

By contrast, institutional actors, particularly policymakers and law enforcement, tend to narrate fear asymmetrically. Policymaker accounts frequently center fear of disorder, unrest, or institutional breakdown, particularly during protest. Safety is described in spatial and procedural terms: securing buildings, restoring order, protecting officials. Law enforcement narratives similarly prioritize officer fear and risk, framing emotional intensity as justification for control, escalation, or surveillance. These fears are treated as legitimate, urgent, and policy-relevant.

This asymmetry produces what I term *affective misalignment*: stakeholders experience different emotions in response to the same events and treat different emotions as politically credible. Community fear and grief are frequently pathologized, minimized, or reframed as irrational, while institutional fear is normalized and operationalized. Emotional legitimacy thus tracks power. Fear attached to police and institutions authorizes action; fear attached to communities is framed as disorder, threat, or excess.

Dehumanization intensifies this affective divide. Community participants repeatedly describe being rendered suspect, dangerous, or disposable through police and media narratives. Language such as "thug," "gang," or "terrorist" circulates affectively, attaching fear to Black and Brown bodies while erasing vulnerability. This process compounds grief and produces moral injury:

participants describe the pain of having to prove their own humanity, or the humanity of deceased loved ones, in public discourse.

Across interviews, trust is not repaired through symbolic gestures or affective appeals alone. Participants explicitly reject public relations efforts—such as youth outreach events or listening sessions—as emotionally hollow when unaccompanied by consequence or structural change. Trust, in these narratives, is not an affect to be cultivated but an outcome contingent on accountability. As several participants note, trust does not save lives; it follows from safety, not the reverse.

Analytically, these affective patterns reveal how the interpersonal domain reinforces hegemonic stability. Affective misalignment narrows the space of political possibility by ensuring that stakeholders do not merely disagree, but *feel* past one another. Fear, grief, and moral injury circulate unevenly, shaping whose pain counts, whose emotions are actionable, and which futures feel imaginable. The result is not only narrative fragmentation, but emotional estrangement—an affective infrastructure that sustains mistrust, forecloses solidarity, and stabilizes police power even in moments of widespread critique.

C.3. Thematic Memo: "Asymmetric Empathy and the Limits of Recognition"

Purpose: This memo examines how empathy is distributed unevenly across stakeholder groups. It shows that emotional recognition follows institutional position, shaping whose suffering is centered, contextualized, and treated as politically consequential.

Overview: Participants across stakeholder groups expressed moral concern and described experiences of fear, harm, and injustice. These expressions were not absent or insincere. They

were patterned. Empathy was directed inward toward one's own institutional position and only partially extended outward. This produces asymmetric empathy: a condition in which emotional recognition is unevenly distributed across groups. *Asymmetric empathy does not reflect a failure to feel. It reflects a structured limitation in whose experiences are fully recognized.*

Empathy and Institutional Position

Law enforcement participants consistently centered the emotional toll of policing on officers. Narratives emphasized danger, uncertainty, and the psychological burden of decision-making under threat. One officer described the job as requiring constant readiness, where hesitation could result in death. Emotional intensity was directed toward officer vulnerability, fatigue, and public hostility. Community harm was acknowledged, but it was not the primary emotional anchor.

Community participants oriented empathy in the opposite direction. Accounts centered grief, loss, and cumulative exposure to harm. One participant described a family member as "brutally executed… beat to death by 17 police officers," framing policing as a source of ongoing trauma rather than protection. Institutional concerns such as officer morale or public perception were largely absent from these narratives. The emotional focus remained on lived consequences.

Policymakers occupied an intermediate position. Their narratives reflected awareness of harm across groups but often translated emotional claims into administrative categories. Harm was discussed in terms of oversight, reform, and feasibility. One policymaker noted that transparency measures could function as procedural responses without addressing underlying

practices, signaling recognition without structural change. Empathy was present but mediated through governance frameworks that limited its political expression.

The Structure of Asymmetry: These patterns show that empathy is not evenly distributed across stakeholder groups. It follows institutional position and aligns with proximity to power, responsibility, and risk.

- Law enforcement narratives center institutional vulnerability
- Community narratives center lived harm and survival
- Policymaker narratives translate harm into procedural terms

Each position narrows the range of experiences that are fully recognized. Empathy extends most readily toward those who share one's institutional location and less consistently across positions.

Implications: Asymmetric empathy contributes to fragmentation in both meaning and response. When emotional recognition does not travel across stakeholder groups, shared understanding becomes difficult to achieve. Harm is acknowledged in abstract terms but not integrated into a common framework for action. This limits the possibility of collective response. Institutional actors can recognize that harm exists without recognizing its full weight or implications. Community actors can articulate systemic harm without seeing their experiences reflected in institutional priorities. As a result, empathy does not resolve conflict. It becomes structured in ways that reproduce it.

C.4. Thematic Memo: "Affective Misalignment"

This memorandum excerpt provides an analytic synthesis of how affective misalignment operates as a mechanism of power within policing. It draws on interview data analyzed in

Chapter 5 to demonstrate how emotional divergence across stakeholder groups contributes to the persistence and stabilization of police authority.

i. Affective Misalignment in the Interpersonal Domain

The interpersonal domain reveals that police power is not encountered primarily as law or policy, but as lived experience shaped through emotion. Across interviews, participants describe policing through fear, grief, vigilance, frustration, and moral judgment. These emotional responses are not incidental. They are patterned and structured.

I refer to this pattern as **affective misalignment**: a condition in which stakeholders experience and interpret harm through divergent emotional orientations that rarely converge. In this condition, each group experiences its own vulnerability as immediate and consequential while rendering the vulnerability of others as secondary, contextual, or abstract. The result is not simply disagreement over policing, but the production of parallel emotional realities.

> *Affective misalignment reflects institutional position rather than individual disposition. It emerges from a broader racialized hierarchy in which actors are differently situated in relation to governance, enforcement, and exposure to harm.*

ii. Fear as a Structuring Condition

Fear appears across all stakeholder groups, but it does not attach to the same object.For community members, fear is tied to surveillance, police violence, and the possibility of escalation. For law enforcement actors, fear is tied to uncertainty, bodily threat, and the need for rapid decision-making. For policymakers, fear is often oriented toward disorder,

institutional failure, or political consequence. These fears are not mutually exclusive, but they are not equally recognized. Because fear structures perception, it shapes what is seen as dangerous, what is seen as necessary, and what is seen as justified. In this sense, fear operates as an organizing condition of the interpersonal domain, shaping how policing is interpreted before any interaction occurs.

iii. Empathy and the Limits of Recognition

Affective misalignment becomes most visible in how empathy is distributed. Emotional recognition is not evenly extended across stakeholders. Institutional actors often center officer vulnerability and organizational strain. Community stakeholders center loss, trauma, and lived harm. Policymakers frequently prioritize stability, legitimacy, and governance concerns. Empathy is present across all groups, but it is structured by position. It narrows toward forms of suffering that are most proximate or institutionally legible. This produces a condition in which: Some forms of fear are treated as rational and actionable. Others are dismissed, reframed, or rendered suspect. Similarly: Some grief is publicly recognized and politically consequential. Other grief is privatized and detached from institutional response. These asymmetries in recognition shape whose experiences are treated as evidence and whose are treated as perception.

iv. Emotional Alignment and Institutional Stability

The interviews suggest that emotional alignment plays a role in stabilizing police power. Institutions do not rely only on formal authority. They also rely on patterns of feeling that reinforce legitimacy. Several recurring dynamics are evident: Officer fear is readily translated into action and justification. Misconduct is frequently framed as exceptional

rather than systemic. Community fear is often interpreted as hostility or noncompliance. Institutional critique is absorbed into procedural or administrative responses. These dynamics show that the interpersonal domain functions as a site where meaning and emotion are aligned in ways that protect institutional continuity.

iv. Affective Repair and Its Constraints

Some participants attempt to bridge these emotional divides. Moments of recognition, solidarity, or moral reflection appear across interviews. However, these moments are difficult to sustain. Institutional roles place constraints on emotional expression and recognition: Law enforcement actors are expected to maintain control and suppress emotional ambiguity. Community members must often regulate their emotional expression to remain legible within institutional interaction. Policymakers must navigate competing emotional claims within political constraints. These conditions limit the extent to which empathy can move across positions. Emotional understanding becomes partial and situational rather than shared.

v. Implications for Chapter 5

Affective misalignment helps explain several empirical patterns documented in Chapter 5: (a) Fear as an affective regime. Fear is not evenly distributed or interpreted. It is structured by position and recognized unevenly. (b) Grief as privatized and depoliticized harm. Loss is experienced collectively but processed individually, limiting its capacity to generate institutional response. (c) The uneven distribution of harm: Emotional experience reflects a broader racialized hierarchy in which exposure to harm and recognition of that harm are not aligned. (d) Self-dehumanization and enforcement: The

emotional reorganization required of officers reflects the institutional management of feeling as part of police authority. (e) Asymmetric empathy: The unequal recognition of emotion functions as a mechanism through which hierarchy is reproduced in interaction. These dynamics show that the interpersonal domain is not simply where policing is experienced. It is where it is reproduced through patterned emotional conditions.

vi. Conclusion

Affective misalignment demonstrates that emotional life is not external to power. It is central to how power operates. Police power persists not only because of institutional design, legal authority, or public narrative, but because emotional worlds remain structured by unequal recognition. Stakeholders do not simply interpret policing differently; they feel it differently in ways that are not equally validated. As long as these emotional divergences remain structured and unaligned, shared language will not produce shared understanding, and institutional arrangements will remain difficult to transform.

C.5. Comparative Memo: "Cross-Positional Interpretation + Affect"

This memo excerpt examines how key concepts related to policing are interpreted across stakeholder positions. Differences in meaning are systematic and aligned with institutional role. These differences extend to emotion, producing consistent patterns of affective misalignment.

Reform: Reform is widely invoked but differently defined. Policymakers frame reform through procedure, feasibility, and institutional constraint, emphasizing policy revisions and reporting structures . Law enforcement actors interpret reform operationally, focusing on

implementation, staffing, and clarity in practice . Community stakeholders define reform as the elimination of harmful practices and redistribution of power. Changes that do not reduce exposure to policing are experienced as symbolic. Outreach and trust-building are viewed as ineffective when practices remain unchanged

Accountability: Accountability is similarly fragmented. Policymakers emphasize transparency and oversight within legal limits . Law enforcement frames accountability as internal discipline and policy compliance . Community stakeholders define accountability as consequence. Without enforcement, accountability is understood as performative rather than substantive

Fear and Safety: Fear is present across all groups but differs in form. Law enforcement describes situational danger, uncertainty, and scrutiny. Policymakers express concern with institutional stability and competing demands. Community stakeholders describe fear as chronic and embodied. Encounters are unpredictable and require constant anticipation, with "no room for mistakes"

Harm: Perceptions of harm also diverge. Law enforcement frames harm as situational. Policymakers translate harm into administrative categories. Community stakeholders describe harm as cumulative and enduring, extending beyond individual incidents. As one participant notes, the effects "never really go away"

These differences reflect institutional position rather than individual belief. Meaning and emotion align with role, producing patterned divergence across domains. Shared terms circulate, but meaning does not converge. This misalignment sustains fragmentation while allowing institutional continuity.

C.6. Reflexive Memo: "Interpreting Affect, Emotion, and Nonverbal Cues"

This memo excerpt outlines how affect was identified and interpreted across interviews using vocalics, speech patterns, and linguistic structure. Affect was treated as observable and patterned, not inferred from content alone. Analysis focused on how participants spoke, including tone, pacing, repetition, and disruption.

Identifying Affective States

Affective distinctions were based on consistent vocal and linguistic cues. Anger appeared through increased volume, faster speech, and reduced filtering. Aiyana's statement that "we need killer cops in cell blocks, period" reflects this pattern, where forceful delivery signals moral urgency rather than deliberation.

- Grief was identified through slowed tempo, lowered pitch, and disrupted sentence structure. Fanta's phrasing, "Every incident is like reliving… my own experience with my son," demonstrates this pattern, where pauses and trailing language indicate emotional weight. Grief often appeared in compressed or inserted statements, embedding loss otherwise analytic speech.
- Fear was marked by softer delivery, higher pitch, and irregular rhythm, often paired with cautious or anticipatory language. Elijah's descriptions of post-policing encounters reflect this pattern, where narrative pacing becomes controlled and self-protective .
- Authority and confidence were indicated by lower pitch, slower pacing, and steady tone. Sandra's reflections on legislative processes demonstrate controlled delivery even when describing conflict, signaling institutional positioning rather than emotional escalation .

Tone, Repetition, and Emphasis

Repetition functioned as an indicator of affective intensity. Phrases such as "very horrible" or "many, many, many iterations" signal saturation rather than emphasis alone. In Scout's account, repetition reflects exhaustion and finality, not escalation. Tone shifts were analytically important. Participants frequently moved between controlled explanation and affectively charged moments. Valentina's interview demonstrates this pattern, where technical framing gives way to more immediate, embodied language when recounting protest experiences. Lexical choices were treated as affective indicators. Terms such as "executed" or "violence workers" signal moral positioning and were analyzed as part of emotional grammar rather than rhetorical exaggeration.

Managing Interpretive Risk

Affective interpretation relied on convergence across multiple cues. No single indicator was treated as sufficient. Vocal patterns, word choice, and narrative structure were read together and compared across interviews. Cross-case comparison was used to distinguish patterned differences from individual variation. Emotional expressions were interpreted in relation to institutional position, limiting overgeneralization. Where cues were inconsistent or ambiguous, interpretation was withheld.

Positional Dynamics

Affective expression varied systematically by stakeholder position. Community participants often exhibited layered affect, where grief, anger, and fear co-occurred. Law enforcement narratives were more controlled, with emotion mediated through professional

language. Policymakers tended toward measured delivery, even when describing conflict or marginalization.These differences reflect institutional positioning rather than individual disposition. Emotional expression, suppression, and framing are structured by proximity to power.

Reflexive Note

Interpretation of affect required ongoing attention to analytic boundaries. Emotional cues were identified through observable patterns rather than assumed intent. Where interpretation risked projection, emphasis was placed on consistency across speech features and comparison across interviews. Positional differences between researcher and participants were considered in assessing tone, particularly in moments of heightened emotion or restraint. Reflexivity functioned as a methodological check, ensuring that affective analysis remained grounded in the data rather than inferred from expectation.

C.7. Raw Divergence Memo: "Interpretive Divergence Across Shared Terms"

This memo excerpt captures an analytic moment where shared terminology across interviews appeared stable but, upon closer comparison, revealed systematic divergence in meaning across stakeholder positions.

Terms as Bridges?

Initial coding suggested overlap in terms like reform, accountability, safety. On closer review, same words, different meanings. Not disagreement in opinion. Different reference points.

Meaning Across Groups

Term	Policymakers	Law Enforcement	Community
Reform	procedural adjustment	operational constraint	insufficient / harm-preserving
Accountability	internal review	unfair scrutiny	punishment / justice
Safety	order / stability	officer survival	freedom from police

Reform

- Sandra: reform tied to process, timing, feasibility. Years of work "went ignored," then moved when conditions shifted. Reform = slow, institutional.
- Aiyana: rejects reform outright. "It's like it's okay to kill, but we're going to start a conversation". Reform = avoidance.
- Scout: "It sounds good on paper… but in practice it does not result in decreased death" . Reform = performance.
- Same term, but not scaling across positions. Feels like different categories, not different opinions.

Accountability

- Aiyana: "cell blocks, period". Accountability = punishment.
- Fanta: focus on report writing, body cam timing. Accountability = control over truth.
- Sandra: laws passed, not followed. Accountability = formal but not enforced.
- Not disagreement over importance. Disagreement over what counts.

Safety

- Fanta: people “wouldn’t even call the police… because of the fear of being harmed” . Safety = absence of police.
- Elijah: “I feared for my life” as trained response. Safety = officer justification.
- Scout: calls the whole conversation a “distraction”. Safety = misframed concept.
- No shared baseline here at all.

Note

Starting to think these terms function more like bridges than definitions. They allow people to stay in the same conversation without actually agreeing on anything underneath.

Question: does the language hold the system together by preventing the disagreement from becoming explicit?

C.8. Case-Centered Analytic Memo “Elijah”

Elijah’s interview provides an unusually clear account of how policing operates from within. As a former officer, he describes not only what police do, but how those practices are learned, justified, and sustained. His responses consistently connect individual experience to broader institutional patterns, including the use of discretion, the normalization of dehumanization, and the internal mechanisms that discourage dissent.

This memo excerpt/summary treats Elijah as an exemplar case. His narrative allows for close examination of processes that are often difficult to observe directly, particularly how officers come to participate in and, at times, resist the system.

Elijah as an Exemplar- An Expose of Policing

This interview feels different from the start. He comes in cautious, measured, almost guarded. Then something shifts. As he talks, it becomes less like an interview and more like a release. Not just critique, but confession. He is not describing policing from the outside. He is exposing it from within, and at the same time trying to make sense of what it did to him.

What stands out first is that he did not enter policing with a desire for control or authority. He entered looking to be seen.

He explains:

"When I joined the police department and I put on a blue uniform, I thought maybe finally someone will see me as a man… someone will finally see me as not being invisible."

There is something heavy in that. Policing is not just a job here. It is a response to invisibility. A way to secure recognition in a society that denies it. But that promise does not hold.

"They didn't see me, they saw the uniform… that wasn't even me, it was a facade."

The uniform does not give him personhood. It replaces it. That replacement seems to be the beginning of everything else.

He describes knowing early on that something was off. Not one specific moment, but a feeling that built over time.

"I knew something was wrong when I would get in that car every day."

That line lingers. It suggests that the problem is not just extreme incidents. It is embedded in the routine, in the everyday.

Exposition of the System At Large

As he keeps talking, a pattern emerges. He repeatedly returns to the idea that policing is not broken. It is working as intended.

“Police… are agents to perpetuate the status quo… they’re used to protect corporate interests.”

He gives concrete examples of this in Detroit. The clearest one is how resources are distributed.

He describes officers overwhelmed with calls in some areas while others are heavily staffed and protected. He is direct about why.

“You’re protecting businesses downtown… because it’s about money.”

He talks about Project Green Light in particular. Businesses that pay get faster responses. Those that do not wait. Protection becomes tied to money, not need. He calls it “morally reprehensible.”

It is not framed as corruption or exception. It is routine. Expected.

He also describes how the department sustains itself internally. There is a strong culture of silence.

“You’ve got no snitch in the neighborhood, no snitch on the police department.”

That symmetry is striking. Silence outside, silence inside. No one speaks. Nothing moves.

And if you do step outside that silence, the consequences are immediate.

“Once you stop being a cop… you’re a traitor… you’re dead to us.”

Belonging is conditional. It depends on compliance.

How Abuse Happens and Why it Keeps Happening

He does not describe abuse as rare. He describes it as patterned and predictable.

A lot of it comes down to discretion. Officers have wide room to act, and that space is where things happen.

He explains how minor violations become entry points:

“They’ll say, ‘Hey, you didn’t use a turn signal’… ‘You have defective equipment.’ Most people who are poor have defective equipment… If I’m choosing between feeding my family and fixing a turn signal, I’m feeding my family.”

These small justifications open the door. Once the stop happens, everything else can follow.

He also talks about how officers learn neighborhoods.

“You get an inner working of the neighborhood and you learn how to profile… you know what to look for.”

That “knowledge” becomes a basis for targeting. It is framed as experience, but it functions as pattern recognition tied to race and place.

He describes how normalized this becomes for residents.

“Most of the kids… know if the black car rides past… just lift their shirt… because they’re stopping just about most pedestrian traffic.”

That is not occasional policing. That is constant surveillance. It reshapes behavior.

There are also unwritten rules.

“If you run from the police you’re probably going to have force used against you that’s not reasonable.”

He says this plainly. Not as an accusation, but as something known.

Dehumanization an Everyday Practice

One of the clearest threads is how people are talked about and understood.

“The first thing you do… is to dehumanize the people… people are referred to as perps.”

Language matters here. “Perp” reduces a person to a category. It makes action easier.

He takes it further when talking about use of force.

“You’re not shooting a person, you’re shooting a threat.”

That shift is everything. Once someone is a “threat,” the moral weight changes.

He connects this directly to training.

“These officers… are doing what they’re trained. That’s what they were trained to do.”

So the issue is not just individual behavior. It is what is taught, repeated, reinforced.

Race as Central

Race runs through his entire account, but often in quiet, direct ways rather than abstract language.

He talks about different styles of policing across the city.

“There is a different style policing… depending on where you are.”

He talks about how officers see people.

“Some officers don’t even see the humanity in the people that they’re serving.”

He links this to what he calls tribalism. He names it as the root of racism.

He also reflects on his own position as a Black officer.

“To be a black police officer is to be like a stepson… a stepchild.”

So the hierarchy exists inside the department as well. Not just in how policing is done, but in who belongs.

One of the clearest comparisons he makes is between protest responses.

In reference to the January 6th Insurrection he says: “If those were Black Lives Matter protestors, it would’ve been a completely different response… they were seen as actual people.”

That phrasing stands out. “Seen as actual people.” That is the distinction.

The Interpersonal Impact of Elijah

As he talks, the emotional weight becomes more visible.

He describes coping by drinking.

“I would drink until I passed out.”

He describes fear, even after leaving.

“I’m more afraid of the police now… I’m doing everything by the numbers… because I just know how easy the violence can come in.”

That line is hard to ignore. Knowing the system from the inside does not make him feel safer. It makes him more cautious.

The turning point seems to come when he can no longer reconcile what he is doing with how he understands himself.

“Now you know that what you're doing is… causing the suffering of other human beings. Do you continue doing it?”

He frames leaving as a moral and even spiritual decision.

“I couldn’t keep doing it and look at myself in the mirror.”

Reflection

What makes this interview powerful is not just what he says, but how he says it. He is not speaking in abstractions. He is describing a system he participated in, benefited from at times, and ultimately rejected.

He does not present policing as a few bad actors or isolated failures. He presents it as a system that:

- protects itself
- trains people into certain ways of seeing and acting
- gives wide discretion that can be used unevenly
- ties protection to money and status
- and operates within, not outside of, racial hierarchy

At the same time, his account is not detached. It is personal. He is trying to explain how someone can enter with hope, stay while knowing something is wrong, and eventually reach a point where staying is no longer possible.

The interview reads less like an opinion and more like an exposure.

APPENDIX D:

SUPPLEMENTAL TABLES

Table A1. A Priori Codebook (Hegemonic Domain)

Code Name	Definition	Theoretical Anchor	Analytic Purpose
Accountability	References to responsibility, consequence, or oversight	Gramsci; legitimacy	Examine how responsibility is assigned or deflected
Reform	Invocations of change, improvement, or correction	Hegemony; passive revolution	Track reform as transformation vs. containment
Safety	Claims about protection, risk, or harm prevention	Racialized state power	Compare whose safety is prioritized
Respect	Moral language tied to authority, dignity, or civility	Moral regulation	Identify hierarchy in recognition
Trust	Conditions under which institutions are seen as credible	Consent production	Examine legitimacy and belief
Legitimacy	Justifications for authority or governance	Gramsci; state power	Identify moral authorization of policing
Professionalism	Appeals to training, standards, or occupational norms	Disciplinary domain	Trace internal regulation and self-legitimation
Community	Constructions of the public or collective	Racialized governance	Examine inclusion, exclusion, and responsibility
Disorder / Crime	Framing of threat or social breakdown	Racialized control	Identify fear-based justification
Individual Responsibility	Attribution of harm to individuals	Neoliberal governance	Track deflection of structural causes

**The above a priori codes were developed prior to open coding and were informed by existing literature on policing, racialized state power, and hegemonic legitimacy, as well as by the Matrix of Domination and Gramscian theories of consent. These codes served as an analytic scaffold rather than a fixed instrument and were refined, expanded, or challenged through iterative coding and memo-writing. A priori codes were not treated as exhaustive and did not constrain emergent coding.*

Table A2. A Priori Codebook (Interpersonal Domain)

Code Name	Definition	Theoretical Anchor	Analytic Purpose
Fear	Expressions of danger, threat, or anticipation of harm	Affective economies (Ahmed)	Compare whose fear is legitimized
Grief	Responses to loss, death, or trauma	Moral injury	Examine cumulative harm
Anger	Moral protest, frustration, or outrage	Political emotion	Trace resistance and delegitimation
Pride	Attachment to role, institution, or identity	Occupational identity	Examine self-legitimation
Shame / Humiliation	Experiences of disrespect or dehumanization	Interpersonal domination	Identify moral injury
Care / Protection	Emotional claims about safeguarding others	Gendered/racialized labor	Contrast paternalism vs. mutual care
Exhaustion	Emotional fatigue or burnout	Structural strain	Examine disengagement and resignation
Hope	Expressions of possibility or futurity	Collective action	Identify openings for solidarity

**The above a priori codes were developed prior to open coding and were informed by existing literature on policing, racialized state power, and hegemonic legitimacy, as well as by the Matrix of Domination and Gramscian theories of consent. These codes served as an analytic scaffold rather than a fixed instrument and were refined, expanded, or challenged through iterative coding and memo-writing. A priori codes were not treated as exhaustive and did not constrain emergent coding.*

Table A3. High Level Analytical Narrative Analysis Codebook (Hegemonic)

Code Name	Definition	Analytic Domain	Illustrative Focus
Reform	Meanings attached to change in policing, including policy, culture, resources, or transformation	Hegemonic	Policy vs. transformation; reform as containment
Accountability	How responsibility, consequence, and oversight are defined and located	Hegemonic	Procedure vs. consequence; individual vs. structural
Respect	Moral language used to define legitimacy, authority, and recognition	Hegemonic	Authority vs. humanity
Safety	Competing definitions of what protection means and for whom	Hegemonic	Officer safety vs. community safety
Trust	Conditions under which institutions or actors are seen as credible	Hegemonic	Compliance, transparency, lived experience
Legitimacy	Claims about rightful authority and moral justification	Hegemonic	Lawfulness, consent, public confidence
Professionalism	Appeals to training, standards, and occupational identity	Hegemonic	Police self-regulation, bureaucratic competence
Technocratic Containment	Use of policy tools to absorb critique without power redistribution	Hegemonic	Oversight boards, training, data systems
Individualization of Harm	Framing violence as isolated misconduct rather than systemic	Hegemonic	"Bad apples," exceptions
Structural Denial	Minimization or deflection of systemic causes of harm	Hegemonic	Culture, community behavior, inevitability

*Codes were applied comparatively across stakeholder groups, not as fixed categories tied to identity. Narrative and affective codes were often applied in tandem to capture how meaning and emotion interact. Coding was used as an analytic scaffold, not a counting device; findings emerge from patterns, contrasts, and memo-based synthesis rather than frequency.

Table A4. High Level Analytical Affective Analysis Codebook (Interpersoonal)

Code Name	Definition	Analytic Domain	Illustrative Focus
Fear / Threat	Expressions of danger, anticipation of harm, or vigilance	Interpersonal	Police fear vs. community fear
Grief / Loss	Emotional responses to death, injury, and ongoing trauma	Interpersonal	Family loss, cumulative harm
Moral Injury	Harm caused by betrayal, dehumanization, or injustice	Interpersonal	Being disbelieved, blamed, erased
Anger / Outrage	Expressions of frustration, rage, or moral protest	Interpersonal	Protest, confrontation, despair
Pride / Identity	Emotional attachment to role or institution	Interpersonal	Police honor, professional esteem
Exhaustion / Fatigue	Weariness from sustained conflict or failed reform	Interpersonal	Burnout, disengagement
Hope / Futurity	Expressions of belief in change or collective possibility	Interpersonal	Conditional optimism, organizing
Asymmetric Empathy	Unequal recognition of suffering across groups	Interpersonal	Whose pain counts
Dehumanization	Language or affect that strips individuals of humanity	Interpersonal	Criminalization, stereotypes
Emotional Legitimacy	Which emotions are treated as reasonable or actionable	Interpersonal	Institutional fear vs. community grief

*Codes were applied comparatively across stakeholder groups, not as fixed categories tied to identity. Narrative and affective codes were often applied in tandem to capture how meaning and emotion interact. Coding was used as an analytic scaffold, not a counting device; findings emerge from patterns, contrasts, and memo-based synthesis rather than frequency.

Table A5. Cross-Cutting Analytic Codes

Code Name	Definition	Analytic Domain	Illustrative Focus
False Consensus	Apparent agreement masking divergent meanings	Hegemonic / Interpersonal	Shared words, different goals
Narrative Fragmentation	Breakdown of shared moral logic	Hegemonic	Talking past one another
Affective Misalignment	Emotional mismatch across stakeholders	Interpersonal	Fear vs. grief
Media / Algorithmic Medi	Role of media in shaping meaning and emotion	Hegemonic	Amplification, distortion
Racialized Harm	Racialized exposure to violence and surveillance	Structural / Interpersonal	Black and Brown communities
Consent Production	Mechanisms through which power is normalized	Hegemonic	Language, emotion, repetition

*Codes were applied comparatively across stakeholder groups, not as fixed categories tied to identity. Narrative and affective codes were often applied in tandem to capture how meaning and emotion interact. Coding was used as an analytic scaffold, not a counting device; findings emerge from patterns, contrasts, and memo-based synthesis rather than frequency.

Table A6. Fractured Meaning of "Reform" Across Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group	How "Reform" is Defined	What Counts as "Reform"	What is Rejected as "Not Reform"	Analytic Interpretation
Policymakers	Policy change, legislation, oversight mechanisms, training, procedural changes, beaurocratic safeguards	New Laws, Boards, Consent Decrees, Formal accountability structures, legislative agendas	Policies without enforcement power, culture unchanged	Reform as technocratic governance constrained by institutional feasibility
Law Enforcement	Professional standards, internal discipline, increasing resources for individual officers and agencies, trasparency, crime prevention	Training, increasing staff, peer intervention, self-correction, technology, increased budget	External mandates, symbolic oversight, public punishment, demonization	Reform as institutional preservation through controlled adaptation
Community Stakeholders	Structural transformation, redistribution of resources, poverty amelioration, justice, consequences for harm	Budget reallocation, firing/prosecution, empowered oversight, alternatives to current systems	Symbolic policy, PR gestures, policy and boards without "teeth," performative police-community events	Reform as power transfer and moral repair

*Differential meanings of "Reform" by Stakeholder Group

Table A7. Fractured Meaning of "Accountability" Across Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group	How "Accountability" is Defined	What Counts as "Accountability"	What is Rejected as "Not Accountability"	Analytic Interpretation
Policymakers	Accountability as procedural legitimacy, governance, and institutional trust. Defined through oversight, due process, and policy compliance rather than redistribution of power.	• Oversight boards and review processes • Transparency and reporting requirements • Firing or prosecution of individual officers • Policy reform, training mandates, and data systems • Financial or pension penalties for misconduct	• Vigilantism or public punishment outside legal process • Structural critiques that exceed legal authority • Reforms that threaten institutional stability or budgets	Community actors mobilize accountability as a counter-hegemonic demand that challenges the legitimacy of policing itself. Accountability is inseparable from dignity and justice; procedural reform without power redistribution is experienced as betrayal rather than progress
Law Enforcement	Accountability as professional discipline, fairness, and reciprocity. Framed as moral self-regulation rather than structural constraint. Emphasizes intent, context, and occupational autonomy.	• Internal discipline and peer correction • Punishment of "bad apples" (firing, demotion, prosecution) • Transparency through body cameras and communication • Admitting mistakes and rejecting cover-ups • Consent decrees and compliance mechanisms	• Civilian oversight perceived as politically motivated or uninformed • Collective blame or systemic critiques of policing • External control over discipline decisions • Framing all misconduct as structural rather than individual	Police narratives moralize accountability while depoliticizing power. By emphasizing self-correction and shared responsibility, officers defend institutional autonomy and translate demands for justice into matters of professionalism and tone, preserving the existing balance of authority
Community Stakeholders	Accountability as power with consequence, moral recognition, and structural justice. Emphasizes truth-telling, equal application of the law, and redistribution of power away from police.	• Firing and permanent removal of abusive officers • Criminal prosecution and incarceration for police violence • Oversight bodies with subpoena, investigative, and enforcement power • Immediate release of evidence (e.g., body-cam footage) • Divestment from policing and reinvestment in community resources	• Advisory boards without enforcement power • Body cameras, training, or policy changes without consequences • Financial settlements paid by cities instead of officers • Reassignment or retraining in lieu of discipline • Public relations gestures framed as reform	Officials translate accountability into managerial containment, converting moral crisis into administrative reform. This preserves legitimacy by signaling responsiveness while limiting the scope of change to what is legally and politically feasible, often leaving underlying power relations intact.

* "Accountability" is a collapsed analytic code derived through an iterative coding process that combined a priori theoretical categories with inductively generated subcodes. Initial a priori codes were drawn from the literature on procedural justice, institutional legitimacy, and critical policing studies (e.g., oversight, discipline, transparency, reform). During open and axial coding, these were expanded into finer-grained subcodes reflecting stakeholder language and emphasis (e.g., "bad apples," subpoena power, internal discipline, truth-telling, reciprocity, divestment). Through constant comparison across stakeholder groups, these subcodes were analytically collapsed into the higher-order category of "accountability" to capture how a shared term operates across distinct moral, institutional, and political registers. The collapsed code thus reflects not consensus, but patterned divergence in meaning tied to stakeholders' positional relationships to police power.

Table A8. Fractured Meaning of "Respect" Across Stakeholder Groups

Stakeholder Group	How "Respect" is Defined	What Counts as "Respect"	What is Rejected as "Not Respect"	Analytic Interpretation
Policymakers	Respect as civility, decorum, and lawful conduct, closely tied to institutional legitimacy and democratic order rather than interpersonal experience.	• Professionalism and restraint in governance • Respectful protest and lawful dissent • Civility in political disagreement • Deference to institutions and offices • Fair process and procedural integrity	• Disruptive protest or confrontational dissent • Emotional or moral claims that exceed procedural bounds • Challenges that threaten institutional stability or public trust	Officials translate respect into normative order-maintenance, treating civility and decorum as preconditions for legitimacy. This framing absorbs moral critique into tone regulation, preserving authority while narrowing the space for transformative claims.
Law Enforcement	Respect as discipline, professionalism, and compliance, framed as both a moral value and an operational necessity. Often articulated as reciprocal but structured hierarchically.	• Civilian compliance, appropriate tone, and obedience to lawful commands • Officer self-control, restraint, and professionalism under stress • Transparency and "owning mistakes" within institutional bounds • Mutual respect narratives ("respect goes both ways") • Relationship-building that affirms officer legitimacy	• Public challenge to police authority • Disrespectful tone, questioning, or noncompliance • Collective critique of policing as an institution • Emotional expressions interpreted as threats to safety or order	Police narratives convert respect into a disciplinary affect: obedience becomes virtue, and civility becomes proof of legitimacy. Even when framed as mutual, respect ultimately stabilizes hierarchy by locating breakdowns in civilian behavior rather than institutional power.
Community Stakeholders	Respect as humanity, dignity, and moral recognition. Defined through fair treatment, restraint, and acknowledgment of shared worth, especially in everyday encounters and moments of harm.	• Being treated as human, not suspect or target • Professional, calm, and non-escalatory interaction • Equal treatment under the law and limits on abuse of authority • Truth-telling and acknowledgment of harm (especially to victims and families) • Consequences for misconduct as a prerequisite for dignity	• Deference to authority without reciprocity • Militarized or aggressive policing framed as "law and order" • Civility demands that silence grief, anger, or dissent • Procedural reforms that leave street-level treatment unchanged	Community participants deploy respect as a moral counter-claim to policing authority. Respect names the absence of humanity under conditions of surveillance and coercion, reframing legitimacy as relational and ethical rather than procedural.

* "Respect" is a collapsed analytic code developed through an iterative process combining a priori theoretical categories and inductively generated subcodes. Initial a priori codes were drawn from literatures on procedural justice, legitimacy, and affective governance (e.g., civility, professionalism, fairness, compliance). During open and axial coding, these were expanded into stakeholder-specific subcodes reflecting lived meanings and emotional grammars (e.g., humanity, dignity, deference to authority, self-control, reciprocity, decorum). Through constant comparison across stakeholder groups, these subcodes were analytically collapsed into the higher-order category of "respect" to capture how a shared moral term operates across divergent institutional positions. The collapsed code does not indicate shared understanding but reveals a hegemonic fracture in which respect alternately signifies humanity, discipline, or order—each stabilizing a different configuration of power.

Table A9. Comparison Table "Respect" vs. "Accountability"

Stakeholder Group	Respect	Accountability	Analytical Contrast
Policymakers	Defined as civility, decorum, and lawful conduct, tied to institutional legitimacy and democratic order. Respect is about tone, restraint, and deference to process.	Defined as procedural governance and oversight. Accountability is located in boards, policies, metrics, and due process rather than redistribution of power or structural transformation.	For officials, respect manages conflict while accountability manages legitimacy. Together, they function as tools of institutional containment, absorbing moral demands into procedural reform and tone regulation.
Law Enforcement	Defined as discipline, professionalism, and compliance, often framed as reciprocal but structured hierarchically. Respect is demonstrated through obedience, tone, and deference to authority.	Defined as internal discipline, fairness, and self-regulation. Emphasizes "bad apples," peer correction, transparency within institutional control, and shared responsibility with the public.	For police, respect stabilizes authority in the moment, while accountability preserves occupational autonomy over time. Both concepts moralize policing while deflecting structural critique, translating legitimacy crises into matters of behavior and professionalism.
Community Stakeholders	Defined as humanity, dignity, and moral recognition in everyday encounters and moments of harm. Respect means being treated as fully human, presumed innocent, and worthy of care.	Defined as power with consequence. Accountability requires enforceable oversight, equal application of the law, truth-telling, and material consequences for misconduct, including removal, prosecution, and divestment.	For communities, respect is affective and relational, while accountability is structural and material. Respect without accountability is experienced as hollow recognition; accountability without respect is impossible because dignity is the moral precondition for justice.

*Across stakeholder groups, respect and accountability appear as shared moral vocabularies, yet they do different political work. Respect governs interaction and affect, while accountability governs structure and consequence. For communities, respect names the absence of humanity and accountability names the persistence of impunity. For police, respect enforces compliance and accountability protects professional autonomy. For policymakers, respect preserves order and accountability preserves legitimacy. Together, these terms create the appearance of consensus while masking fundamentally incompatible visions of justice, authority, and power—illustrating how hegemonic language stabilizes governance even amid deep moral fracture.

APPENDIX E:

ANALYTICAL POLICY MEMORANDUM

Immigration Enforcement Expansion and the Consolidation of Federal Police Power

Robyn T. Moore

March 2026

Purpose: This memorandum documents the rapid expansion of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) since January 2025 and situates these developments within broader patterns of American policing. It provides empirical grounding for arguments developed in Chapter 6 regarding the consolidation, scaling, and transformation of police power across domains. This memorandum synthesizes reporting from government documents, investigative journalism, legal filings, and advocacy organizations. It is not intended as an exhaustive dataset but as a structured compilation of convergent evidence.

Context and Relevance: The developments documented below emerged during the final stages of this dissertation and provide real-time empirical evidence of the dynamics analyzed throughout this project. In particular, they illustrate how expansions in state coercive capacity are paired with weakened oversight, how carceral infrastructures scale across institutional domains, and how policing logics extend beyond traditional municipal boundaries.

When I first began writing this dissertation, I had no idea how quickly the implications would become relevant. Since January 2025, the Department of Homeland Security, under President Donald Trump, has dramatically expanded immigration enforcement through ICE and a rapidly

growing network of state and local partnerships (DHS 2025; ACLU 2026; ICE data 2026). Critics argue that this expansion has functioned as an increasingly centralized national policing apparatus under the guise of immigration enforcement (ACLU 2026; Migration Policy Institute 2025; Guardian 2026).

The patterns documented in this memorandum are referenced in Chapter 6 as contemporary evidence of the consolidation and intensification of police power across institutional domains. They demonstrate that the dynamics identified throughout this dissertation are not confined to local policing but extend to federal enforcement regimes, where scale, discretion, and reduced oversight amplify the same underlying logics. As such, ICE serves not as an exception but as a critical site through which the broader architecture of American policing becomes more visible.

1. EXPANSION OF ENFORCEMENT / DECLINE IN OVERSIGHT

The rapid expansion of ICE alongside the collapse of oversight mirrors long-standing patterns in American policing, where increased budgets, personnel, and tactical capacity are routinely paired with weakened accountability mechanisms. Just as local police departments have historically expanded through federal grants while internal affairs and civilian oversight lag behind, ICE's growth reflects a familiar dynamic: state capacity for coercion scales faster than its capacity for restraint, producing predictable patterns of abuse and limited redress.

- ICE funding has expanded dramatically, with the 2025 reconciliation bill allocating approximately $75 billion to ICE over four years and raising its annual budget to roughly $28.7 billion, nearly triple its FY2024 level (Brennan Center for Justice 2025; CFR 2026).

- The agency has also more than doubled its workforce from about 10,000 to over 22,000 agents, a roughly 120% increase, with over 12,000 new hires added in 2025 alone (GovExec 2026; DHS 2026).
- Oversight offices gutted: Three major DHS watchdog offices were effectively dismantled, removing ~300 oversight personnel and key complaint channels (Washington Post 2025; Reuters 2026).
- Inspections declined: ICE detention facility inspections fell by 36.25% in 2025, even as detention and deaths increased (Project on Government Oversight 2026).
- Training standards have been significantly reduced, with ICE academy training shortened from roughly 22 weeks to as little as 8 weeks (or about 47 days in some reports), alongside cuts to language and legal instruction (Brookings 2026; GovExec 2026).
- Additional expansion includes $45 billion to scale detention capacity to over 100,000 beds and roughly $30 billion dedicated to hiring up to 10,000 additional enforcement officers (CFR 2026; American Immigration Council 2025).
- 200+ federal court rulings have rejected Trump-era ICE detention policies as unlawful or unconstitutional, issued by 100+ federal judges across administrations (Politico 2025).
- A major lawsuit alleges ICE has subjected over 2 million people to unconstitutional arrests through database-driven enforcement practices since 2008, with concerns continuing into the present expansion (National Immigrant Justice Center 2025).
- Congressional oversight materials describe “widespread reports of abuse and possible misconduct” during enforcement operations, including violations of civil rights protections (U.S. House Oversight Committee 2026).

2. DETENTION CAMPS

The expansion of large-scale detention infrastructure parallels the carceral expansion of jails and prisons under mass incarceration, particularly the use of private contractors, low-wage labor, and remote or industrial siting. Like prisons, ICE facilities rely on institutionalized labor extraction, cost minimization, and spatial isolation, suggesting that immigration detention is not an exception but an extension of the broader U.S. carceral system.

- Reports document mass detention at unprecedented scale, including plans to expand capacity to over 100,000 detainees and the use of large, repurposed warehouse-style facilities (Associated Press 2026; American Immigration Council 2025).
- At least $45 billion has been allocated specifically for building, expanding, acquiring, or repurposing immigration detention facilities since January 2025, including new detention centers, family detention sites, and converted facilities (American Immigration Council 2026; Brennan Center for Justice 2026).
- Additional reporting indicates individual expansion plans totaling roughly $38.3 billion to scale detention capacity (e.g., mega-centers, warehouses, and processing hubs), showing how that broader funding is being operationalized into new infrastructure (Associated Press 2026).
- ICE plans include at least 23 new warehouse-based detention sites nationwide and 8 large-scale detention centers plus 16 processing centers, many located in industrial zones (e.g., warehouses, logistics hubs), which are often near transportation infrastructure but not systematically categorized by rail access (Associated Press 2026; Spotlight PA 2026; Washington Post 2026).

- Media and court reporting show that ICE detention facilities use a $1-per-day "voluntary work program," and detainees in major cases have alleged they were effectively coerced to work through threats of punishment, including solitary confinement (Reuters 2026; Newsweek 2025).
- At the Tacoma ICE facility, ProPublica reported that detainees performed jobs such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning that GEO itself estimated would otherwise require 85 full-time employees, while still fighting to keep pay at $1 a day (ProPublica 2025).
- ICE facilities have already accumulated 60 violations of federal detention standards within the first 50 days of operation at a single new site (Fort Bliss), including abuse and due process failures (ACLU 2025).

3. WRONGFUL DETENTIONS

The wrongful detention of U.S. citizens and legally present individuals reflects policing practices such as stop-and-frisk, pretextual stops, and wrongful arrest, where legal status does not shield individuals from state coercion. ICE's authority to detain without immediate judicial oversight amplifies dynamics already present in policing, where discretion, racial profiling, and database-driven enforcement produce systemic misidentification and unlawful detention.

- Investigations and reporting document systematic violations of ICE's own detention policies, including holding people far beyond legal time limits (e.g., days to months in facilities meant for ≤72 hours) (The Guardian 2025).
- Tens of thousands of people are being held in civil detention without criminal conviction, often for prolonged periods, under conditions that detainees and advocates describe as coercive and inhumane (Human Rights Watch 2025; ACLU 2025).

- More than 170 U.S. citizens have been wrongfully detained by ICE or other DHS agents in 2025, including Jason Brian Gavidia (The Guardian 2025; El País 2025), Javier Ramirez (The Guardian 2025), Elzon Lemus (El País 2025), and Leonardo Garcia Venegas (The Guardian 2025) (ProPublica 2025).
- At least several hundred legally present individuals have been wrongfully detained (ProPublica 2025)
- Investigative reporting has documented at least several hundred legally present immigrants, including visa holders and lawful permanent residents, who have been detained by immigration authorities since 2025 (ProPublica 2025; Brennan Center for Justice 2026).
- At least 3,800 children were detained by ICE in 2025, and many were separated from a parent or guardian, with some classified as unaccompanied or released within days due to separation (The Marshall Project 2025; Washington Post 2026)

4. IN CUSTODY ABUSES

Patterns of sexual abuse, physical violence, and coercion in ICE custody mirror well-documented abuses in jails and prisons, where closed institutional environments, power asymmetries, and weak oversight enable systemic harm. The recurrence of these abuses across facilities indicates that, as with policing and corrections, misconduct is not incidental but structurally produced within carceral institutions.

- Senate investigations identified 1,037 credible reports of human rights abuses between January 20, 2025 and January 12, 2026, including 41 cases of physical and/or sexual abuse in DHS custody and 18 cases of mistreatment of children as young as two (Ossoff 2026; The Guardian 2025).

- One confirmed criminal case involved former contract detention officer David Courvelle, who pleaded guilty in December 2025 to sexually abusing a detainee at the South Louisiana ICE Processing Center (Gray News 2025).
- Los Angeles Times (2025) reported multiple complaints accusing a detention lieutenant of sexual assault, harassment, and coercion against detainees in ICE custody (Los Angeles Times 2025).
- Complaints and lawsuits from detainees in Louisiana facilities describe sexual assault, including forced sexual acts by staff in "camera blind spots," along with threats and retaliation (The Guardian 2025).
- Broader investigative reporting shows repeated allegations of sexual abuse and harassment across ICE facilities, indicating a pattern of misconduct rather than isolated incidents (Louisiana Illuminator 2025).
- Reports from facilities like Fort Bliss and Louisiana centers describe sexual abuse, physical violence, and retaliation against detainees, including minors, often with complaints ignored or dismissed (ACLU 2025; Guardian 2025).
- Detainees at a California ICE facility described conditions as a "torture chamber," citing extreme neglect, abuse, and prolonged suffering (ACLU 2025)
- Research shows prolonged solitary confinement (15+ days), which the United Nations defines as psychological torture, affecting thousands of detainees (Axios/Harvard/PHR 2025)

5. EXCESSIVE FORCE AND CIVIL RIGHTS COMPLAINTS

The surge in civil rights complaints alongside declining investigation rates parallels policing, where complaint systems exist but rarely produce accountability. As in local law enforcement,

high complaint volume combined with low investigation rates signals institutional insulation, where formal channels of redress function more as symbolic mechanisms than effective checks on power.

- Approximately 2,000–3,000 federal immigration agents, including about 2,000 ICE personnel, sent to the Minneapolis area in early 2026, described as the largest such operation on record (PBS NewsHour 2026).
- Reporting also indicates major enforcement deployments across at least 10 U.S. cities, typically involving hundreds of agents per location rather than thousands (Capital B News 2026).
- Approximately 6,000 civil rights complaints (including allegations of brutality, excessive force, and abuse by ICE agents) were filed with the Department of Homeland Security's civil rights office in 2025 alone (The Guardian 2026). This is far higher than earlier complaint volumes handled annually by DHS oversight offices, indicating a significant increase in reported misconduct (The Guardian 2026; DHS 2024 data)
- At the same time, oversight capacity has collapsed, with DHS cutting watchdog staff from ~150 to fewer than 10 and reducing inspections by 36%, meaning fewer complaints are investigated despite more being filed. Subsequently, only 183 of the roughly 6000 complaints (about 3%) were directly investigated, indicating that thousands of reported incidents of misconduct or brutality were filed but largely not pursued (The Guardian 2026).

6. DEATHS

Deaths in ICE custody and from enforcement actions parallel deaths in police custody, particularly in how they are normalized, undercounted, and often attributed to individual

circumstances rather than systemic conditions. The concentration of deaths during rapid expansion reflects a familiar pattern: as enforcement intensity increases, so does the lethality of state contact, without corresponding structural reform.

- At least 9 people have been killed by U.S. immigration agents (ICE/CBP) since January 2025, including multiple U.S. citizens, alongside over 30 deaths in ICE custody in 2025 and several more in 2026 (American Immigration Council 2026; The Guardian 2026; Reuters 2026).
- At least 32 people died in ICE custody in 2025, the highest annual total in over two decades, with several additional deaths (bringing the total to roughly 35–40+) reported in early 2026 (The Guardian 2026; U.S. Senate 2026).
- Four Haitian women who had been deported from Puerto Rico were later found murdered near the Haiti–Dominican Republic border (Latin Times 2026; Amsterdam News 2026).
- Advocacy sources indicate additional deaths of deportees after return (including in unstable conditions or custody abroad but there are no verified totals (WOLA 2026; PBS 2025).
- In addition to fatalities, at least 19 people have been shot (non-fatally) by ICE/CBP agents since January 2025, indicating a broader pattern of lethal and near-lethal force beyond deaths alone (The Week 2026).
- At least one death in ICE custody in 2026 has been ruled a homicide (asphyxiation during restraint by guards), showing that not all deaths are due to natural causes (Associated Press 2026).

- Deaths are occurring very early in detention, with some individuals dying within days or even hours of being taken into ICE custody, raising concerns about intake conditions and medical screening (Washington Post 2025; The Guardian 2026).
- The surge in deaths coincides with a record detained population of roughly 65,000–70,000 people, suggesting deaths are occurring within a rapidly expanded detention system (Reuters 2026; Washington Post 2025).

7. DISAPPEARANCES

Reports of detainees becoming untraceable echo patterns in policing such as informal detention, delayed booking, and custodial opacity, where individuals temporarily or permanently disappear from formal tracking systems. ICE extends this dynamic transnationally, where movement across jurisdictions and borders further obscures accountability, amplifying a problem already present in domestic policing.

- At one Florida facility ("Alligator Alcatraz"), hundreds of detainees disappeared from ICE's database, with ~800 of 1,800 no longer listed and another 450 untraceable, leaving families unable to locate them (Miami Herald reporting via Democracy Now!; Project Censored 2025).
- Reporting found "two-thirds" of detainees at that site vanished from official records after intake, raising major transparency concerns (Democracy Now!/Miami Herald 2025).
- Across the system, detainees are frequently missing from the ICE locator for days or not listed at all, requiring repeated calls to locate them (AFSC 2025).
- In 2025, 250+ migrants (e.g., 252 Venezuelans, 32 Salvadorans) were effectively "disappeared" after ICE custody and transferred abroad without notice, vanishing from tracking systems (Human Rights First 2025).

- News reporting confirms detainees “vanished” from ICE systems after arrest, with families unable to confirm location or status (Washington Post 2025).
- Families of deportees report no information about whereabouts after removal, including cases linked to detention abroad (AP News / Human Rights Watch 2026).
- A U.S. elementary school student was considered missing for weeks before being discovered in ICE detention, with no initial record in the system (Washington Post 2026)

8. DEPORTATIONS

Mass deportation functions analogously to incarceration as a mechanism of population control, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities. Just as policing and imprisonment remove individuals from communities under the logic of public safety, deportation extends this logic beyond national borders, reinforcing racialized social control through legal and administrative means.

- By early 2026, at least 622,000 immigrants had been deported since Trump took office (DHS 2025; Reuters 2026).
- The current level of deportations represents the highest annual total of formal removals recorded by any U.S. president, exceeding the previous peak under Obama by more than 200,000 (Pew 2014).
- There is no official estimate of how many U.S. citizens have been deported by ICE since the takeover, however, there have been some confirmed cases including at least three children under the age of 10 (ACLU 2025).
- The federal government does not systematically track deportations by legal status, making aggregate estimates unavailable. However, multiple confirmed cases of

deportation involving individuals with legal status have also been reported, but no comprehensive total exists (ProPublica 2025).

- The absence of systematic tracking means that the scale of wrongful deportations of both citizens and noncitizens remains unknown and likely underreported, as cases typically surface only through investigative journalism rather than administrative recordkeeping (ProPublica 2025).

These patterns suggest that ICE does not represent a departure from American policing but rather its federal consolidation and intensification, operating more visibly and more expansively while reproducing the same underlying logics of discretion, coercion, and limited accountability. Within the framework of racial capitalism, this expansion can be understood as the continued management and extraction of racialized populations through state violence, where detention, deportation, and surveillance function as mechanisms for regulating labor, mobility, and disposability. At the same time, ICE operates as a node within the broader matrix of domination, where structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal forms of power converge to produce and legitimize harm. The scale and visibility of ICE enforcement make these dynamics more legible, but they do not mark a rupture; rather, they reveal the underlying architecture of American policing itself.

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