

Criminality, Interpersonal Proximity and the Stop-Snitching Code: An Examination of Offender and Non-Offender Perceptions

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Abstract

A number of studies have examined the relationship between the ‘code of the street’ and the concept of snitching (that is, informing the police). With some notable exceptions, these studies have generally focused on the pervasiveness of a ‘stop-snitching code’ or ‘code of silence’ among street offenders. In this study we seek to broaden understanding of the stop-snitching code by exploring perceptions of active, former, and non-offenders living in areas considered by residents to embody the street code. We find that informal cultural norms do in fact dissuade both offender and non-offenders from cooperating with police, but also that personal experience with police, proximity to offences and offenders, and types of crimes in question play major roles in the contextual framing of whether or not people choose to cooperate with the police.

Keywords: active offenders – police-citizen interaction – code of the street – stop-snitching code – code of silence – Canada

Introduction

During July 2012, the city of Toronto, Canada, experienced its worst mass shooting, leaving 18 people injured and two dead (McDiarmid et al 2012). The same summer, a man opened fire in a major mall in the centre of downtown Toronto, and earlier that year a man was murdered in a barber shop. In all cases, the police immediately began urging residents to come forward and speak out if they had knowledge that could help with the investigations. Working against the image of the police as a trustworthy ally in the pursuit of justice, however, is a strong cultural opposition to cooperating with the police. Indeed, in 2012, another major news story in Toronto covered the physically violent arrest of a Black man in front of his son on a

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YMCA basketball court (Rankin 2012), after which residents lashed out at police, and the man's family filed a lawsuit against the city.

Since the early 1990s, a movement encapsulating this opposition has formed, referred to as the 'stop-snitching campaign', resulting in a stop-snitching culture (Smith and Holmes 2003). This phenomenon has also been referred to as the 'code of silence' (see Miller 1996). This code is exemplified in 'street culture', particularly among street offenders (see, for example, Decker and Van Winkle 1996; Anderson 1999; Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright 2003; Woldoff and Weiss 2010; Clayman and Skinns 2012). Yet, despite increasing discussion of the stop-snitching phenomenon in both scholarly literature and public discourse, relatively few studies have examined the similarities and differences between views of active, former, and non-offending residents living in neighbourhoods thought to typify resistance to the police (Carr, Napolitano and Keating 2014 is an exception). In the current inquiry, we seek to fill this gap by providing such a comparison, drawing on interviews conducted during 2012 with 30 residents of predominantly minority, low-income neighbourhoods in Toronto.

Snitching and related concepts

The act of snitching has traditionally been linked with police informants — a realm often examined by legal scholars (see, for example, Rich 2012), but since the early 1990s it has transitioned into a cultural phenomenon embedded within the code of the street (Woldoff and Weiss 2012; Masten 2009). Though the term 'snitch' has proliferated in popular culture, especially in North America, other synonyms are likely used in various regions and contexts (for example, a snitch is sometimes referred to as a 'phizzgig' in Australia). The stop-snitching code itself has also been referred to by such terms as the 'wall of silence' (Dixon and Maher 2002). Regardless of the term used, some scholars have linked attitudes in Black communities (particularly in the United States ('US')) toward cooperating with authorities to historical misuse of Black informants to control slaves and crack down on civil rights activists (see Dennis 2013). Further to the colloquially relevant status of the term, we also consider its more recent history. Masten (2009) traces the roots of the contemporary stop-snitching campaign to rap lyrics of the early 1990s, specifically to a video entitled 'Stop Fucking Snitching'. Videos such as this one have been accompanied by stop-snitching shirts and other visible proclamations of anti-snitching attitudes (Woldoff and Weiss 2010). Such examples may be viewed as cultural artefacts, central to the construction of cultural imperatives about the police, but, given their public visibility, they also speak to the already widespread suspicion of police in minority neighbourhoods (see, for example, Woldoff and Weiss 2010), especially among active offenders (Jacobs 2004).

While cultural influences such as music (see Kubrin 2005) likely do inform the stop-snitching code to some extent, actual police-citizen interaction is a dynamic central to the stop-snitching phenomenon. Much of the police-citizen interaction literature has considered traffic stops (see, for example, Tillyer and Engel 2013; Novak et al 2012; Alpert, Macdonald and Dunham 2005; Ponder 2002), but considerable attention has also been paid to police-citizen interaction and urban minority residents outside of traffic stops (especially youth). Dixon and Maher (2002) provide detailed accounts of Indo-Chinese youth involved in drug use and distribution in Sydney, Australia and their (mostly negative) experiences with the police. Brunson (2007) offers evidence that accumulated negative experiences with police have a strong influence on young Black men's perception of police racism, eroding the perceived legitimacy of the police (also see Brunson and Miller 2006; Douglas and Atherton 2007); and Gau and Brunson (2010) specifically consider the impact of continued (even

relatively minor) policing of racialised groups, suggesting that it erodes confidence in the procedural fairness of the criminal justice system. Reitzel and Piquero (2006) propose that a few punctuated cases of racism may have a similar impact on perceptions of justice (or the lack thereof).

A good deal of attention has also been paid to the role of race in perceptions of police specific to the Canadian context. While some controversy over racial profiling in Canada exists (see, for example, Gabor 2004), and despite a lack of detailed information related to race and criminal justice released by the Canadian government (Owusu-Bempah and Wortley 2014), there is still evidence that race plays a significant role in police decisions to stop and search (particularly youth) in Canada (see Fitzgerald and Carrington 2011; Wortley and Tanner 2005; Wortley and Owusu-Bempah 2011). It is thus not surprising that Wortley and Owusu-Bempah (2009) found that suspicions of racial bias are most significant among Black residents of Toronto.

Race is not the only factor that informs the stop-snitching code. Masten (2009) draws our attention to the cultural processes through which snitching has been socially constructed. Akerstrom (1988) draws further attention to the social construction process whereby snitches are identified, pointing to the selective processing of information in the formation of judgments about individuals and categories of persons with respect to who does and does not snitch, and thus who is and is not deserving of respect. Brunson and Weitzer (2011) present compelling evidence that citizens (especially youth) transmit information to each other regarding the appropriate ways in which to handle unwelcome police encounters. In a broader sense, such socialisation may occur in what Anderson (1999) refers to as the 'code of the street'.

In the code of the street, respect is a form of cultural capital (Anderson 1999) that can be gained or lost through decisions such as whether to cooperate with police officers. Refusal to help the police is a form of resistance, and adherence to this code is central to maintaining one's position of respect, autonomy and masculinity. As Copes and Hochstetler (2003) make evident, street offenders often engage in situational rituals in order to maintain and promote their masculinity, but Anderson (1999) suggests that non-offenders must likewise vie for respect. Some of these acts are violent, especially among males who are more likely to retaliate against affronts through the use of violence (Mullins, Wright and Jacobs 2004). This violence falls outside of the realm of formal intervention, but is perceived as more potent and necessary (Miller and Decker 2001). Participation in cultures of opposition (to police and other authorities) may be prompted in part by police treatment of citizens, but this participation then leads to further exclusion and often further alienation and mistreatment by the police and criminal justice system more broadly (see Dixon and Maher 2002).

Anderson (1999) suggests displays of autonomy extend to encounters with the police. Indeed, for many adhering to this code, 'policemen, public officials, and corporate heads are unworthy of respect and hold limited moral authority' (Anderson 1999:36). According to Anderson, for street offenders as well as many non-offending residents in the same neighbourhoods, this position is grounded in perceptions of as well as actual encounters with the police.

These concepts are relevant to the current inquiry in that they can provide explanations for offender and non-offender adherence to the stop-snitching code. They can also explain seemingly paradoxical breaks from the code. For example, the respondents interviewed by Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright (2003) were adamantly opposed to snitching, but also indicated numerous cases where they did cooperate with police. These cases arose from fear of

retaliation from the police that outweighed the potential threat from aggrieved parties within the social and neighbourhood spheres inhabited by offenders.

Despite occasional breaks from the stop-snitching code, the threat of retaliation remains a potent regulator of offender and non-offender behaviours with respect to informing the police. For example, Anderson (1999) presents several cases where non-offending residents called the police and later regretted doing so because the police brought unwanted attention that could result in retaliation. Furthermore, individual and collective protection is often preferred to the involvement of formal parties (that is, the police) who are often distrusted (see, for example, Clayman and Skinns 2012). Thus, as Massey (1995) suggests, the nature of segregated urban ecology results in collective strategies of informal (community) social control, often leading to increased violence and chances for victimisation.

The current inquiry

Though a small number of studies have considered diverse perspectives of snitching (for example, St Jean 2005; Carr, Napolitano and Keating 2014), beyond a focus on the role of race, research on snitching has historically focused on offenders (Woldoff and Weiss 2010). Seeking to address this gap in the literature, in the current inquiry we examine the differences and similarities between offender, former offender, and non-offender motivations for adhering to a stop-snitching code. More specifically, we consider residents' opposition to police based on direct experiences with police versus principles that are culturally situated through the acquisition of knowledge from peers, family members, the media, and so on. Further, we examine the impact that both geographic and relational proximity to offender and criminal event have on whether or not offenders and non-offenders will cooperate with the police.

Sample

Our study draws on in-depth interviews with 30 active, former, and non-offenders residing in various disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Toronto, Ontario. We use the terms 'disadvantaged', 'marginalised', and 'street' interchangeably throughout. These terms are derived from the literature (see, for example, Kane 2005) as well as the frequent terms used by our respondents to describe their neighbourhoods, including 'street', 'ghetto', and 'the projects'. Defining neighbourhoods as high crime is difficult, but like Carr, Napolitano and Keating (2014:453), we do so by conceptualising them 'both in terms of the cognitive maps employed by area residents to describe where they live and on the basis of colloquial designation of neighborhood areas in the city' (2014:453).

Clayman and Skinns (2012) emphasise the importance of interviewing persons with different types of contact with the police (for example, as victims, witnesses or suspects). We interviewed 10 active offenders, 12 former offenders, and eight non-offenders. Twenty-one of the respondents were male, 22 self-identified as Black, one as African Canadian, six as White (two of whom identified as Italian Canadian), and one as Hispanic/Latino. The average respondent age was 22, the youngest 17, the oldest 29.

All of these respondents were recruited through a snowball sampling method common to active-offender research (or, as Carr, Napolitano and Keating 2014 term it, 'chain-referrals'). Initial access was gained through Bobby, who had grown up in a relatively disadvantaged, high-crime neighbourhood of Toronto, and knew active offenders still living in the area.

Because of this familiarity, Bobby served as a co-interviewer as well as an expert field worker (for a more detailed account of the role of a field worker, see Wright and Decker 1994).

We employed snowball sampling in part because it was one of the few feasible ways to gain access to the relatively 'hidden' population of active offenders where random sampling is an improbable option (Faugier and Sargeant 1997; Wright and Stein 2004), but also because it would offer a rare opportunity to examine the networking structure between active, former, and non-offenders. Snowball sampling has a long tradition in research on active offenders, dating back to at least the early Chicago school (see, for example, Whyte 1955). While snowball sampling has been criticised for its potential lack of generalisability and biases created by potential gatekeeper biases (Groger, Mayberry and Straker 1999), it produces strong internal validity, especially given the cyclical nature of snowball sampling, which also provides opportunities for useful comparison within one's sample (Berg 1988; Van Meter 1990). Indeed, it may be the case that in our sample we were directed to persons who shared a like-minded perspective regarding snitching, but, as Wright and Stein (2004) point out, samples constructed from institutional populations may be even less representative than snowball samples drawn from the 'real world'. We contend that, especially in the case of examining attitudes toward the police, a sample of non-institutionalised persons, regardless of their proximity to one another, is at least as unlikely to present biases as a sample drawn from an institutional population.

St Jean (2007) employed a similar approach, interviewing a mixture of persons including offenders and non-offenders. As with St Jean's research, our own sampling approach heightens internal validity by creating a more proximate and complete account of the biographical and situational contexts of not just offending, but also 'life on the street' more generally. This method also facilitates an exploration of the link between proximity to crime and likelihood to cooperate with the police. Furthermore, sampling offenders and non-offenders of the same race enables us to examine experiences with racial profiling through a multi-variable lens of race and offender status (see also Batton and Kadleck 2004). While we cautioned respondents to avoid revealing specific locations in which they had committed crimes, we did prompt respondents to discuss the neighbourhoods in which they currently or had previously lived. Since we interviewed many respondents in their homes, we were also able to visibly validate the conditions. In one case, for example, a respondent took us on a tour of a condominium he characterised as 'ghetto', showing us the back stairway where he pointed out urine, drug paraphernalia, and spots where residents and non-residents would have sex. Another interview took place in an apartment building with visible signs of disrepair and litter, both inside and outside. We also used crime and poverty maps to help validate the conditions of neighbourhoods discussed by respondents (see Cain 2013; Friesen, Rajagopalan and Strashin 2014).

We did not attempt to verify claims of criminality through any type of criminal background check, instead relying on self-reported statuses. We directly inquired of respondents whether or not they were currently involved in criminal behaviour, and further probed regarding the timeframe they used to define 'current'. While these accounts varied, we generally held that persons self-identifying as offenders and having offended within roughly a year were, for the purposes of this study, active offenders. Because of our snowball sampling approach, as well as Bobby's familiarity with many of the social circles from which respondents were drawn, we were also able to cross-validate many of the claims made by respondents regarding their criminal behaviour. On many occasions, for example, when a respondent would refer another potential interviewee, Bobby was given an account of the new interviewee's status by the referring respondent. In this way, we were able to both generate internal validity and establish some rough framework for conceptualising active, former, and non-offender statuses.

It is common in research with offenders (and much research in general) to pay respondents. While some studies have offered fairly modest compensation — Hochstetler (2003) paid interviewees currently under criminal justice supervision US\$15 each — we found that the ‘going rate’ for offenders in our 2012 study was higher, ranging from CA\$25–\$50. This range depended largely on the length of the interview, type of offender, relational proximity to the person making the reference, and whether or not it was the first interview we had conducted. We also found it useful to offer compensation (again dependent on several variables) for recruiting a respondent. Wright and Decker (1994) used a similar approach. Some respondents were willing to speak to us for free. These respondents were usually either more closely connected to the co-author or had a strong desire to ‘tell their story’. The notion of story-telling is tied with narrative interviewing, a technique employed by other scholars examining cynicism toward the police (see, for example, Carr, Napolitano and Keating 2014).

Regardless of their criminal status, the majority of our respondents (63 per cent) self-identified as Caribbean Canadians. With the exception of one, all Caribbean Canadians in our study identified as Black. It is notable that Wortley (1996) and Wortley and Owusu-Bempah (2009, 2011) present evidence that Black Canadians (specifically in Toronto) perceive the police as being more racially biased than do White and Chinese Canadians in the same region (however, recent immigrants were found to be more trusting). Furthermore, while cultural differences exist between Caribbean Canadians and African Americans in the US, there are many similarities between this sample and those in studies conducted in the US. According to Plaza (2006:217), in response to hostility toward African Canadians, many ‘African Caribbeans developed a Pan-African identity that connected them to a larger, global Black struggle. This Pan-African identity turned the oppressors’ negativity around and gave individuals a feeling of Black pride’.

This, combined with the reality that ‘Caribbean migrants arriving in Canada were not met by a large, well-established African Canadian population’ (Plaza 2006:212), and the fact that ‘[t]he residential geographies of Afro-Caribbean immigrants in Canadian cities have frequently been described in terms of “ghetto” or “near-ghetto” imagery’ (Peake and Ray 2001:180) drives many Caribbean Canadians to adopt similar positions as African Americans in the US with respect to discrimination, racism, and oppression by dominant (White) culture, institutions, and agencies (for example, the police).

This reality is particularly salient in the current study because it provides a clear link between the current sample and samples constructed in similar studies conducted across the US. In fact, it was not uncommon for respondents in our study to compare Canada to the US, especially with respect to police practices, racism and, ultimately, the notion of snitching. This link is also important because it incorporates the possibility that many Black Canadians consider themselves part of a community that has historic reasons for distrusting authorities (see Dennis 2013). Thus, while we will draw on discussions of Canadian-specific constructs, our overall sample and the findings derived from it are comparable to similar studies in the US. However, such comparisons must still be approached with caution, as Sprott and Doob (2014) suggest that lumping all visible minorities together, particularly in Canada, is problematic. They suggest that disaggregation is required in order to tease out differences in perceptions of police. To this end, we are careful to consider our respondents’ accounts of their own experiences as racialised persons. Such discussions were frequent during the course of our interviews.

Method

Our interview approach was semi-structured, guided by an interview outline. However, this initial guide was quickly abandoned in favour of a more impromptu, narrative approach. This adjustment stemmed in part from the reality that many of our interviews took place in unorthodox settings (for example, a car) where respondents were often cued by environmental elements (for example, a place where they had committed a robbery) to discuss certain aspects of their lives or offending, because respondents seemed naturally inclined to fit their responses around a narrative structure, and also because our interviews took much longer than we expected (between one to three hours). With respect to setting, our approach was extremely similar to Copes and Hochstetler's (2003), in which they interviewed respondents in places including homes, cars, taverns and libraries — sites those authors describe as 'not ideal' (2003:284). Regardless of the settings in which our interviews took place, we did place emphasis on deriving narrative accounts from respondents. We began each interview by asking respondents to describe their experiences 'growing up'. Their accounts were often of life in the actual neighbourhood in which the interview was taking place. This frequently led to lengthy, uninterrupted narratives from respondents. Our openness to adapting to the interviewees' response styles was in part aimed at accounting for the texture and complex spatiality and temporality of victimisation/offending experiences (see, for example, Wilkinson 2007; Henriksen and Miller 2012; Downing et al 2013).

Findings

The interviews described above were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded for the themes of race, location, proximity to criminals and criminal events, and elements of the code of the street, such as masculinity. Within each of these categories, special attention was paid to nuanced distinctions between principled versus experience-based opposition to the police.

Principled and experience-based opposition among active, former and non-offenders

Perhaps unsurprisingly, we found that all respondents (30 of 30), regardless of whether they were involved in criminality, distrusted the police. However, it is important to disaggregate reasons for such opposition. For example, Sprott and Doob (2014) find that 'on the interpersonal aspects of policing — the police being approachable and treating people fairly — visible minorities rate the police less favourably than do others. But on the more technical side, visible minorities and others do not differ significantly' (2014:372). Worrall (1999) also provides evidence for the need to examine perceptions of police in a disaggregated way. Worrall (1999) suggests that perceptions of police efficacy and police fairness, while often related, are not synonymous, and that residents can have confidence in one but not the other. Clayman and Skinnis (2012) locate opposition to cooperating with the police in what they refer to as 'social factors' (which they primarily identify in the form of gangs and older peers), and Morris (2010) points out the widespread nature of the stop-snitching phenomenon, suggesting that as a socially constructed movement it spans beyond Black, urban communities. Our respondents echoed these broader, socially constructed principles surrounding snitching. For example, Marcus (a 25-year-old Black male active offender) told us of the stop-snitching code, he 'probably heard it before and it just stayed in my head, I don't know. I can't tell you where I got it from though'. Some respondents suggested that the stop-snitching code transcends racial boundaries. For example, Ghost (a 21-year-old Black male active offender) suggested that 'the White guy listens to rap music and does a lot of stuff and won't snitch either. Like he won't say anything 'cause he's living by that same code of conduct, his lifestyle'.

In spite of a recognised broad, principle-based code, concrete personal experience with police is also a likely contributing factor (see, for example, Anderson 1999; Baron et al 2001; Brunson 2007; Carr, Napolitano and Keating 2014). Callanan and Rosemberger (2001) specifically examine socialising forces (for example, the media) versus direct contact experiences with police, finding that the latter has a greater influence. In examining the motivations for distrust of police in relation to personal experience, socialisation, place and criminal involvement, we do find evidence that direct and indirect exposure to criminal justice agents influences these motivations, supporting Thorkildsen, Sodonis and White-McNulty's (2004) findings that suggest the extent to which a person is exposed to procedural justice, as well as whether or not this process is perceived as fair, impacts the person's belief and investment in formal procedural justice.

Procedural justice is embedded within a larger concept of justice inclusive of distributive, retributive, and restorative dynamics (see Downing 2011). For example, Tod, a 20-year-old Black male non-offender told us he did not trust the police, but his anger was not directed at them specifically. Instead, he located it in a more general, yet pervasive angst against 'just society ... I'm mad at society man. It's hard being a Black guy in this world'. This sentiment was shared by Stretch, a 23-year-old Black male active offender who also located injustice in the context of racism: '[I]f there was that trust between cops and Black community, the crime would be solved faster. But there is no trust because they stereotype Black people. They treat them like crap.' Such sentiments mirror those expressed by racially and culturally excluded youth in Dixon and Maher's (2002) study who desire what they refer to as the 'American Dream', but are simultaneously barred from acquiring it because of their race, class and, in some cases, perceived or actual criminal (sub)cultural membership. However, broader social perceptions about race and class are also tied to accumulated life experiences involving actual contact with police. G, an 18-year-old Black male active offender located his unwillingness to cooperate with police in consistent (or as Brunson 2007 would contend, accumulated) experience, telling us that 'growing up like in the projects it ruins like your look on police. You know you don't trust them, you don't like you and police don't get along like that's just how it goes. It's like normal thing for police to harass you, you know'.

Direct experience with the police, especially by former offenders, reinforces the belief that the police are unjust. For example, Gerome, a 22-year-old Black male former offender, told us that he does respect the police to some extent, but that 'growing up I never really had any respect for the police cause there were times when I didn't even do anything, honestly. I used to get beat up. I used to get pulled over'. Gummy, another former offender (26, Black and male), shared similar experiences: 'Like when I wasn't doing any criminal activity, they just like pull me over for no reason and treat me like ... you know what I mean. Completely wrong, and there pretty much is nothing I can do. I can go complain or try to sue them but what's really going to happen?'

This sense of powerlessness, even when the person is not engaged in crime, illustrates the pervasiveness of disenfranchisement from formal methods of (criminal) justice.

Kushman, an 18-year-old Black male active offender also told us he will never call the police: 'Honestly it's fucked up, police — yo — I'm sorry — yo — but we'll never get along. Still it's not going to happen.' He was, however, conscious that certain types of people in his neighbourhood may call the police on him, 'like parents maybe or people we don't really talk to, you know'. As an active offender, he benefited from being cognisant of who does and does not abide by the stop-snitching code. This awareness is of particular benefit to active offenders, and we find no indication that non-offenders actively seek to develop a detailed knowledge of who would and will not call the police. Increased need for knowledge about

spatial and social landscapes within the neighbourhoods in which they lived and offended is consistent with Dixon and Maher's (2002) findings that drug-involved youth sought information about police habits and routines in the areas they frequented during their drug use and exchange.

Indeed, beyond considerations of justice, active offenders may also simply view any involvement with the police as risky. This practical concern was voiced by Marcus, who told us: '[T]he way I look at is like not snitching is like, if you do dirt, you can't tell on somebody that's doing dirt. If somebody's not doing dirt and something happens to them and they decide to tell, they have a right to but he would need to be protected by somebody.'

Thus, we found that while all of our respondents distrusted the police, there arose nuanced differences in the form this distrust took, and the reasons it manifested. Below we will examine these differences as framed within the constructs of race and place and how proximity to victims impacts the likelihood to snitch.

Race and place

The afore-discussed body of literature's emphasis on opposition to the police in a racialised context makes it important to consider how this variable operates with respect to our study. We do so by considering the intersection between race and place as it relates to our respondents' daily lives and experiences with and attitudes toward police. Novak and Mitchell (2012) draw attention to the role that race and place play in police officer decision making with regard to traffic stops and searches. In the current inquiry we are also interested in race and place, but from the perspective of the resident, rather than the officer. More specifically, our findings suggest that expectations for police behaviour depend both on perceptions of race and racism as well as on where, with respect to expectations of the racial composition of an area, the offender or non-offender encounters the police.

We find that offenders may use an understanding of race and place to navigate potential conflict with law enforcement. For example, C, a 20-year-old White male active offender remarked that, without the police, the 'world would be crazy', but he also contended that cops do not respect him or his kind (referring to persons in low-income neighbourhoods). He did, however, take advantage of being White when dealing with the police, telling us that one has to 'use whatever you can'.

Non-offenders also experience racialised encounters with the police. Tony, a 19-year-old White male non-offender living in a predominantly Black neighbourhood told us that:

I mean like getting pulled over with your friends for smoking a joint, I mean whatever. But we've gotten off on it a few times. They never really given us a hard time. I mean but we got lucky though, like if I was Black and smoking a joint ... they're gonna fucking write it up and whatever.

In part because Tony has gotten off, he asserted that some cops are 'decent'. He told us that:

Obviously some days you hate them when they pull you over and they give you a ticket and you try telling them I had a reason to speed, you know. Then there's days when they're cool and you can smoke a joint and they'll just say go smoke it somewhere else man. Don't be doing this here.

Star, a White female former offender told us that she feels 'tested' as a White person living in 'the projects': 'Yeah I think that it's like a respect thing and like I think they just want to make sure because maybe they think White people are snitches.' Rob, a non-offender (19, White male) resident of a similar neighbourhood, noted that he often felt he had to prove he

was not racist. Rob suggested to us that behaviour of the police impacts Black persons' perceptions of all White residents, not just those acting on behalf of law enforcement.

Tanisha, a 27-year-old Black female former offender made reference to the importance of the stop-snitching code to Black communities specifically, suggesting that 'any dialogue or any code or any communication with the police, *especially in the Black community* for example, it's definitely called snitching. So to me there's no way around it' (emphasis added).

That active, former, and non-offenders all consider race and place interactions is telling. It suggests that the stop-snitching code is motivated through a nuanced process that is context-sensitive, rather than necessarily driven by broad cultural imperatives such as rap lyrics, media portrayals or a 'general' race-culture based orientation toward the police.

We postulate that our respondents universally, irrespective of race, distrusted the police and adhered to the stop-snitching code in part because of an investment in the code of the street, primarily its emphasis on toughness and masculinity (see Anderson 1999). For example, when asked if he would call the police if robbed, K-Fooz, an 18-year-old Black male non-offender told us that: 'Like if you know me, like I'm not the strongest guy, but out of respect my friends know that a situation did come, I'm not going to call the police to deal with it, realistically I'm just going to beat him up and shit, and handle it.'

The construction of masculinity on the street is an important part of the stop-snitching code. Being a tough guy and a hustler (even if not an offender) is important — some evidence even suggests that street residents feel they must neutralise 'good' behaviour (Topalli 2005) — and our respondents often cited this as a reason for not talking to the police, even if they were not offenders. This dynamic comes into play for females as well, who must 'handle' situations themselves, even if this means asking for the help of male relatives or friends (Miller and Decker 2001). Indeed, Mischief, a 27-year-old Black female active offender told us that she would never call the police, but instead would 'just handle it'. She later spoke of her connection to friends and family and how this was important to maintaining security. The maintenance of safety and security adds an additional layer to the important influence of peers and family with respect to stop-snitching (see Clayman and Skinns 2012; Warr 2002). These connections also provide increased considerations, as family members could be targeted as the result of snitching. Nicole told us that 'the rule is if you snitch, you're going to get it somehow, you're family's gonna get it, you're gonna get it, your boyfriend's gonna get it, your girlfriend's gonna get it, whoever, your friends are going to get it'.

Thus, we find evidence that a common, neighbourhood-rooted interest in the code of street and its emphasis on toughness provided a shared impetus for our respondents' opposition to the police, regardless of race.

Crime type and proximity factors

As discussed, geographic place serves as one contextual framework for variables such as race, but we also find that crime type and proximity to specific crimes and crime in general are significant contextualisation frameworks in maintaining adherence to the stop-snitching code. These factors also relate to interpersonal connections between offenders and non-offenders.

Our findings suggest that at the core of the proximity and crime type dynamics lies a deep distrust of the police. As Bubbles, a 23-year-old Black female non-offender told us: 'I feel like they [the police] serve and protect when it's necessary. But they don't. They don't serve and protect everyone, they pick and choose who they want to serve and protect.'

This orientation toward the police makes self-help a necessary, if not attractive, option. Brittney, a 23-year-old Black female former offender remarked that ‘sometimes it is not as extreme to go to the police whatever the case is. Sometimes you can handle it yourself’. Our question is, however, what constitutes ‘sometimes’? And does the definition vary depending on the status of the victim (that is, is he or she an active, former or non-offender)?

To answer these questions, we draw on the thoughts of our respondents regarding general and specific experiences with both formal and informal mechanisms of justice. For example, Christina, a 20-year-old White female former offender shared with us that she had once been chased and nearly assaulted, after which she called the police, who provided little help. She ‘kind of learned to trust the people I know that I can have security with rather than the police because I always get shafted with them’. This example draws our attention to the reality that high levels of neighbourhood disorder result not only in distrust of police, but also of other residents (Ross and Pribesh 2001).

Other respondents shared similar experiences about calling the police with frustrating results. However, we also contend that the normality of ‘disorder’, as Ross and Pribesh (2001) put it, places residents (whether offenders or not) in a position where calling the police is simply not considered. For example, Snappy, a 29-year-old Black female non-offender pointed out that, when she was growing up, her parents would rarely call the police when there were fights because it was so commonplace: ‘Because it was almost like, I can’t say a regular thing but it happened quite often, like arguments or guys at the basketball court fighting. It was just, you left it alone.’

‘Leaving alone’ may, in the case of Snappy, refer to simply not initiating contact with the police, but snitching is often the consequence of police-initiated investigations. In this respect, we find overwhelming consensus in our sample that any involvement with the police is considered dangerous. As Karlton Hines, a 24-year-old Black male offender put it:

I don’t like the police. I don’t think I’d ever be a cop. I know some people who hate them and if they just drive by, they’ll be like fuck the cops. I don’t like them but I would never take it to that extent but I couldn’t work with the police. I couldn’t help them with anything. Like I don’t want to be involved with anything like that.

Karlton Hines considered snitching to be ‘working with’ the police. This was a common sentiment among those we spoke with, but there is some variability with respect to the crime type and willingness to do such work. Contrary to our initial hypothesis, our interviews suggest that more serious crimes are less likely to be reported, especially by persons (non- or former offenders) who feel particularly unprotected. As Christina remarked: ‘You don’t snitch. If you ... if someone ... if someone finds out that you’re the snitch, you’re done. They’re coming after you. Especially if it’s something bad involving weapons, anything like that where there is real harm, you just know they’re coming after you.’ Ghost echoed this concern, telling us that ‘sometimes like your help [to the police] may not be help for yourself you know. Like you think ... you’re trying to be helping them but you’re not helping yourself. You’re putting yourself in a worse situation’.

In both of these cases, the respondents suggested that they engaged in an analysis of risks when considering whether or not to cooperate with the police. These analyses took into account the ‘badness’ of the crime, the logic being that a more serious crime poses greater potential risk with regard to police involvement. In our study, this logic is employed by both offenders and non-offenders, illustrating that both principled and experience-based opposition serves to reinforce the stop-snitching code.

Further to crime type and proximity to the crime and involved parties, the criminal status of the potential snitch is relevant. Active offenders, we find, are dissuaded by the 'hustler' identity from genuine cooperation with the police. This identity emphasises 'smoothness' and the ability to deal with any situation, especially on one's own turf, again emphasising the importance of physical proximity. For example, J-Snowy, a 26-year-old Black male active offender told us: 'I talk to them [the police] ... try to be slick but they try to get me to react ... they say why the fuck you telling me I'm doing my job? I know my fucking job.' As an active offender, he told us that he goes out of his way to respect cops, but also thinks they are afraid of 'guys like me'.

J-Snowy's remarks illustrate the construction of police *and* criminal activity as work. This makes sense in light of the previously discussed reference to snitching as 'working with' the police. J-Snowy's comments also reflect a desire to, as Gummy referred to it, 'outsmart' the police. In both cases, the respondents indicated that they feign respect for the police in situations where personal freedom is at stake. Similarly, Zeek, an 18-year-old Black male drug dealer told us that he 'always try to start out with respect so they [the police] can let me go about my business'. Therefore, we find evidence that active offenders are unlikely to cooperate with police outside of these situational contexts. P Stacks, a Black 29-year-old male active offender illustrated this process when he described a typical encounter with the police: 'First, how you doing officer, how you doing? How's your day today? You know, I just ... polite, very, very polite, warm welcome, you know. Let them know I'm not afraid you know what I mean. They don't touch me, like they'll just let me go.'

Pretty Boy, a 23-year-old Black male offender told us that he consciously tried to intimidate police officers, recounting that during an altercation with the police, 'one of the cops reached and tried to get in my face and I looked at him like I'm not afraid of you'. Thus, it is likely that while both offenders and non-offenders engage in a threat-analysis when deciding whether or not to cooperate with the police, (especially active) offenders process additional considerations including the maintenance of respect and identity in a cultural context where these assets are paramount forms of capital (see also Wright and Decker 1994; Anderson 1999).

In summary, our findings suggest two significant relationships between crime type, proximity to crime, and likelihood to abide by the stop-snitching code:

1. Less serious crimes in close proximity to residents of disadvantaged neighbourhoods are viewed as commonplace. Our respondents agree that the police will do little to stop such crimes and that their involvement will only make things worse.

In fact, the police's approach to convincing residents to abandon the stop-snitching code can be perceived as itself an excuse for poor police-work, and also as a reinforcement of racist objectives. As Tanisha told us, 'see, they try to say because people are not snitching and not talking they can't solve any crimes, they can't solve any murders right. Um so instead what they do is they harass all these young kids, especially Black, young boys.'

Acts of violence are often acts of conflict management (Cooney 2003) and, on the street, this management can result in a feeling that the police are ineffective, or simply not needed to manage or resolve disputes, as Tanisha's sentiments reflect.

2. More serious crimes in close proximity are taken seriously, but, because of potential retaliation, offenders and non-offenders view involvement with the police as dangerous. In other words, the very people physically and relationally closest to a crime are often the least willing to provide information to the police.

Links, an 18-year-old Black male non-offender told us: 'I guess yeah basically it's a fear for some people. People find out you know that the other person's talking, they're going to come after that person. They're going to seek vengeance or whatever to show revenge you know.' Part of this fear emerges from distrust in the police's ability to maintain anonymity (also see Anderson 1999). Rob reflected on this:

You know they [the police] say ... you're anonymous, you're anonymous but someone always finds out somehow. So people I know who have helped the cops, people know they talked to them you know what I mean. So there's always a way of finding out.

Violent retaliation is not the only form of revenge. Fear of marginalisation from one's community is also a factor considered by offenders and non-offenders (also see Dixon and Maher 2002). As Nicole, a 22-year-old White female non-offender told us, 'like if you snitch, that's it ... you're cut off kind of thing'. In both of these relationships, active offenders calculate the risks of social exclusion and its impact on their criminal work. Additionally, for active offenders, the prospect of going to jail may add incentive to avoid talking to the police. As P Stacks put it: '[A]nybody, anybody. What I've learnt and when I was like, three, four years old, my uncles always used to say, rats get poisoned, and it's true. Rats get poisoned because you cannot, you cannot rat anybody out. As soon as you go in jail, you're going to get done up.'

The fear of getting 'done up,' either in jail or on the street is, we argue, a potent regulator of offender behaviour, particularly with respect to snitching. This likely holds true even for non-offenders (if to a lesser degree) as Masten (2009) points to the reality that many of those invested in the stop-snitching code are not offenders and are innocent of any involvement in cases where they refuse to speak with the police.

Conclusion

Our findings offer support for previous research that has established a link between opposition to police cooperation and the street code. However, beyond this link, our findings suggest that residents in neighbourhoods where such a code is prevalent are sensitive to the proximity of victims and offenders with respect to their willingness to engage the police, as well as the structural contexts of race, income, and location. These dynamics prove particularly salient for active offenders, who may be inclined to engage in additional calculations when determining whether or not to interact with the police. In our study, active offenders also demonstrated a keener understanding than non-offenders of the social landscape of their neighbourhoods with respect to who would and would not cooperate with the police.

Indirect exposure to negative police interactions also played a role in our respondents' attitudes toward police cooperation. Although they were cognisant of cultural forces reinforcing stop-snitching codes (for example, music), our interviewees did not necessarily identify these as central sources of their socialisation into such codes. Instead, they tended to discuss socialisation through friends and family, and personal experiences. They also generally suggested that they would socialise their children to distrust the police, regardless of what neighbourhoods they lived in.

Race and gender played some role in our respondents' attitudes toward the police, but the differences were not significant. Status as an offender or non-offender appears more significant in our findings, as does direct and indirect experience with the police. Concepts central to masculinity and toughness reinforce stop-snitching codes, but our findings also suggest that this reinforcement can and does extend to female residents in neighbourhoods

where the street code is prevalent. Ultimately, while our study presents a number of potentially fruitful avenues for understanding anti-snitching attitudes, particularly with regard to intersectionality of individual statuses (such as race and gender) with structural variables, future research is needed to more fully explore these links.

Implications for future study

We agree with Clayman and Skinn's (2012) assertions that triangulated approaches to studying resident and police perceptions of snitching are important to uncover the complex motivations of adherence to the stop-snitching code. Unlike Clayman and Skinn's, our study's sample consists entirely of adults (over the age of 18). Thus, we are able to provide a different perspective, which, combined with research on other life stages, may yield greater understanding of adherence to the stop-snitching code across the life course.

Another noteworthy difference between our results and those of Clayman and Skinn's (2012) is that we find little relationship between gang involvement and the stop-snitching code. This is likely due to the nature of our sample (most of whom did not identify as gang members), but, combined with Clayman and Skinn's findings, it nevertheless provides evidence that motivations for adherence to the stop-snitching code vary between gang and non-gang members. This variation suggests that a variety of social learning mechanisms are likely to influence adherence to the stop-snitching code. Such research can also incorporate Topalli's (2005) expansions to include neutralisation of good behaviour within the framework of neutralisation theory. Future research will benefit from closer examination of these theoretical and empirical linkages, particularly as they pertain to what Topalli (2005) refers to as 'contextual forces' operating on the street. Related to social learning and neutralisation are the principled and experience-based motivations for adherence to the stop-snitching code. While our study located principled opposition in socialisation mostly through friends and family, and not popular media sources such as music, future studies may benefit from focused attention on the construction of this type of opposition from multiple sources.

Implications for policing

There is strong evidence that racial profiling erodes trust in formal procedural justice (see, for example, Tyler and Wakslak 2004). Such trust is important to encouraging regular cooperation with the police and, as our study and others have suggested, stop-snitching is at least in part a response to a lack of trust in police. Thus, one possible solution is to increase policing policies that attempt to re-engage citizens in non-investigative contexts, for example, through citizen review mechanisms (see Smith and Holmes 2003). These mechanisms need to involve a range of citizenry, not just the 'old heads' described by Anderson (1999) as the 'decent', law-abiding residents of a neighbourhood. Indeed, street offenders are important reinforcing agents of the stop-snitching culture. Thus, as Rosenfeld, Jacobs and Wright (2003) suggest, increased legal avenues for street offenders to seek resolution for disputes may decrease opposition to cooperation with the police, as well as the perceived necessity to engage in retaliatory violence. Interestingly, respondents in Carr, Napolitano and Keating's (2014) study suggested, in spite of their cynicism toward the police, that increased police presence in their communities would be an effective way of combating crime. In the current study we find that respondents likewise do not dismiss the potential role of police, but conceptualise their effectiveness as hinging on a willingness to interact informally with residents (even criminal ones). Carr, Napolitano and Keating (2014) also offer support for this belief among certain residents, noting that informal social control through 'efficacious' interactions with police are already present, and could be useful in the eyes of residents. Such efforts may also reduce violence through a perceived need to engage in self-help justice

(Stewart, Schreck and Brunson 2008). A theoretical as well as pragmatic attempt to establish the effectiveness and appropriateness of formal versus informal responses to crime also needs to be sought. It is not enough to set up a binary between 'self-help' and formal policing that assumes a hierarchy of ethicality and justness. Attempts by scholars, policymakers and, particularly, police to engage residents in establishing these delineations could go some way toward cementing trust between residents and formal legal agents.

Legal protection for persons working with police is also important to the establishment of trust. Rich (2012) suggests that, legally, little is required of police in terms of protecting informants who are also active offenders. Rich suggests that this reflects a societal perception of active offender informants as undeserving of respect and subsequent protection. Rich, however, suggests that protection beyond what is currently legally required for informants is not only ethically appropriate, but would also bolster cooperation. We agree, particularly in light of the evidence that offenders and non-offenders alike must already navigate a number of social, cultural and ethical barriers when assessing whether to cooperate with the police — barriers made more substantial when fear of personal criminal justice intervention is present.

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