"Surveillance Hot Spots: The Geography of Stop and Frisk in Nine U.S. Cities"

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Abstract

Police agencies across the United States employ stop and frisk practices as part of a proactive crime-fighting strategy. These tactics are criticized because they disproportionately implicate Black and Latinx individuals, tend to be concentrated in poor neighborhoods of color, and sometimes involve the detainment of people who are never arrested. However, existing social science scholarship does not adequately address why some neighborhoods experience more stop and frisk activity than others. Moreover, it fails to consider the ways that proactive policing is legally contextualized, which is important because legal scholars argue that the threshold for conducting stops is lower in poor, minority neighborhoods than in whiter, more affluent areas. Additionally, the conversation around stop and frisk has largely revolved around one jurisdiction – New York City. This project addresses these shortcomings in two stages. First, I use two years of data (2016 and 2017) from nine cities in the United States (Austin, Boston, Chicago, Denver, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C.) to examine which social processes generate geographic variation in stop and frisk across census tracts and identify characteristics of "surveillance hot spots" – those areas that experience exceptionally high concentrations of stop and frisk activity. Second, I investigate whether the law is implemented differently across neighborhoods by exploring if reasonable suspicion is established in unique ways in marginalized spaces. I combine three types of data to analyze these relationships, including: (1) pedestrian stop and frisk incidents, (2) crime incidents, and (3) demographic data from the Census and American Community Survey. Analyses for stage one consist of estimating spatial regression models to identify why some areas become surveillance

hotspots and experience elevated pedestrian stop rates. Analyses for stage two involve estimating spatial regression models to evaluate the relationships between neighborhood marginality, reasonable suspicion justifications, and "hit rates" of pedestrian stops. This study contributes to academic understanding of inequality in the criminal justice system by exploring the roots of these inequalities. Moreover, the results have implications for police agencies, including understanding the consequences that stop and frisk can have for police-community relations.