

# The Cumulative Discretion of Police over Community Complaints<sup>1</sup>

Tony Cheng

*University of California, Irvine*

Many policing practices that scholars have identified as deeply flawed are precisely those demanded in police-community meetings. How do initiatives intended for police reform become dominated by demands for *more* policing? I analyze 1.5 years of ethnographic data on the New York Police Department's neighborhood policing meetings. Amid highly publicized police violence, America's largest police force is curating the public's complaints—not ignoring them—from constituents strategically cultivated through community initiatives. Whereas existing studies conceptualize complaints as grievance tools or liability risks, this case reveals how police conceive community complaints as endorsements of services. This conception guides “cumulative discretion” or selective decision-making across multiple stages: police mobilize, record, internalize, and represent complaints demanding police services, while excluding those seeking reforms to over- and unequal policing. Gaps thus persist between the reforms that some residents seek and the services that police offer. This article offers insights into how organizational imperatives for legitimacy can undermine institutional reforms.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, scholarship has increasingly scrutinized some of the most central practices in urban policing for the inequalities they reproduce: neighborhood

<sup>1</sup> This project was supported by the Institution for Social and Policy Studies at Yale University. I would like to thank Andrew Papachristos, Tracey Meares, Issa Kohler-Hausmann, Philip Smith, Michael Sierra-Arévalo, Theresa Rocha Beardall, Collin Mueller, Sarah Brothers, and Wayne Rivera. This article has benefitted from presentations given at Northwestern University, the University of Nebraska–Omaha, Yale University, and the University of California, Irvine. I also thank all the participants involved in this research

saturated patrols (Legewie and Fagan 2019), big-data surveillance (Brayne 2017), school policing (Shedd 2015), third-party policing (Desmond and Valdez 2013), and stop-and-frisk (Legewie 2016). Yet, while researchers have examined how police enforcement exacerbates inequality, scholarship often overlooks how *nonenforcement* practices can also promote inequality. This has critical implications for community vitality precisely because policy makers often present expanded engagement in nonenforcement contexts as positive police reforms.

In fact, in the aftermath of police violence from Rodney King to George Floyd, policy makers have persistently sought to increase nonenforcement contact by investing in police-community relations (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015; Beck and Rice 2016; Budryk 2020). Most recently, in the mid-2010s, major police departments like those in New York City and Chicago have implemented “neighborhood policing” as revitalizations and expansions of community policing from past decades (see Herbert 2006; Skogan 2006; Gascón and Roussell 2019). For example, one year after Officer Daniel Pantaleo killed Eric Garner in 2014, the New York Police Department (NYPD) began holding police-community meetings as a key feature of its Neighborhood Policing Plan. Unlike civilian complaint review boards, where residents submit formal complaints against specific officers to an external oversight agency, these police-community meetings invite residents to informally express any issues or concerns that they have to the police officers assigned to their neighborhoods.

I attended these NYPD meetings for 1.5 years in two precincts in Brooklyn, and throughout this time, I noticed a disconnect: residents often requested the very practices that scholars have argued are deeply flawed. For example, unlike Legewie and Fagan (2019), tenants called for the return of Operation Impact’s saturated foot patrols (Sector 55C, February 2019).<sup>2</sup> Rather than problematizing surveillance (Brayne 2017), parents asked how they can upgrade outdated pole cameras to \$50,000 Argus surveillance cameras (Sector 80A, April 2019). And despite scholarship on unwanted police contact in schools (Shedd 2015), on private property (Desmond and Valdez 2013), and on the street (Legewie 2016), meeting attendees often requested greater police presence in schools (Sector 80A, April 2019), heftier fines to motivate landlords to self-police their property (Sector 55C, May 2019), and the reinstatement of stop-and-frisk (Spiegel interview, October 31,

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project. Thank you to the *AJS* reviewers. Direct correspondence to Tony Cheng, Department of Criminology, Law and Society, University of California, 3361 Social Ecology II, California 92697. Email: tony.cheng@uci.edu

<sup>2</sup> Meeting precincts and sectors are referred to in shorthand by the precinct number followed by the sector letter. All precincts and names are anonymized, and specific meeting dates are excluded to preserve precinct anonymity.

2018). How does a community initiative intended for police reform become dominated by demands for *more* policing?

Potential explanations can center on the role of either community residents or police officers. Resident-based explanations typically focus on two explanations. The first is self-selection: despite heterogeneous demands within the community, those who participate in police-community meetings could systematically prefer more policing.<sup>3</sup> The second looks to inadequate participation: insufficient involvement by residents undermines the potential of police-community initiatives to gather and incorporate the full spectrum of public input into police priorities.<sup>4</sup> Yet resident-based explanations are incomplete. As the 2020 protests across the nation against police violence showed, residents with alternative preferences toward police *do* affirmatively exercise their voice—just not in police-community meetings. Furthermore, resident-based explanations do not explain how police-community initiatives, despite their inclusive design, can fail to facilitate more representative public input.<sup>5</sup>

Doing so requires officer-based explanations, which argue that gaps between policy and practice often emerge from the priorities of institutional actors themselves. In the past decade, political sociologists have documented the role of participatory initiatives in managing public affairs, socializing stakeholders, and, ultimately, legitimizing elite authority by shaping the public's capacity to make contentious claims (Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker 2015; Levine 2017; Lederman 2019). Entities from modern corporations (McDonnell and King 2013) to authoritarian governments (Lee and Zhang 2013) invite public input not as a “mere charade” (McQuarrie 2013, p. 22) but as a strategy of domination that often entrenches power rather than flattening hierarchies. When it comes to police-community initiatives, scholarship has described how officers are incentivized and positioned to resist, deflect, or ignore public input (e.g., Walker 2016; Gascón and Roussell 2019; Cheng 2020). In contrast, I argue that amid intensifying public scrutiny over police practices, police departments are increasingly curating the public's complaints—not

<sup>3</sup> For example, discussing the reputation crisis of government in general, Lerman (2019) argues that poor public services can become a “self-fulfilling prophecy” as people pursue private alternatives.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Skogan (2006, p. 324) explained that Latinos were underrepresented in police-community meetings in Chicago because of demographic reasons (young, working, renters, language barriers) and that it was “more or less beyond the ability of the police to do anything about [that].” Even in more critical analyses, Herbert (2006, p. 136) expresses skepticism toward community initiatives, but only because the “community is unbearably light”: residents lack the capacity to sufficiently organize and have their voices heard.

<sup>5</sup> To be clear, this article is not arguing that one set of community demands is more “valid” than any other set. Instead, the main point is that the complaints that *are* heard are often unrepresentative because of how institutional actors—here, officers—implement initiatives in pursuit of organizational priorities.

ignoring them—from the constituents who have been strategically cultivated through community initiatives.

Drawing on ethnographic data on NYPD meetings and New York State Freedom of Information Law (FOIL) documents, this study aims to understand the role of police discretion in shaping community complaints raised in police-community meetings. In the context of highly publicized police violence across America, the country's largest police force is responding to its legitimacy crisis by presenting itself as neighborhood service providers, mobilizing residents to demand police services, and claiming legitimacy therefrom. Existing studies on complaints, disputes, and grievances typically focus on two parties: *complaint submitters*, who conceive complaints as vehicles to express grievances (e.g., Felstiner, Abel, and Sarat 1980), or *accused parties*, who view complaints as risks and liabilities (e.g., Edelman 1992). In contrast, I emphasize the role of police as *complaint managers*, or institutional actors who conceptualize complaints as endorsements of their services. This conception guides how police exercise what I term “cumulative discretion”—selective decision-making across multiple stages—when executing meetings and cultivating community complaints.

I provide evidence by combining multiple data sources to render police discretion visible and systematically trace the interactional production of community complaints. Specifically, (1) citywide meeting information scraped from social media reveals recurrent meeting venues and venue associates; (2) ethnographic observations of meetings uncover the subset of vocalized complaints that police deem actionable; (3) analysis of meeting write-ups submitted to supervisors shows the particular complaints that are organizationally internalized; and (4) postmeeting tweets exhibit how meetings are strategically represented to the public. These analyses highlight the interpretive work of officers in mediating the complaints that travel from a resident's mouth, to meeting whiteboards, to a supervisor's desk, and onto the precinct's social media page. With each stage, the consequences of police discretion accumulate and the prospects for systemic police reform become less likely: as returning residents begin to submit requests that align with the police's goals, others become one-time attendees who raise issues of police reform that are ultimately omitted from internal records and public representations. Police authority within neighborhoods is thus entrenched, not reformed, as an enduring gap persists between the reforms that residents seek and the services that police offer.

Focusing on how cumulative discretion operates in neighborhood meetings reveals how community initiatives are useful and productive to police, as officers have asymmetrical power over how public input is recorded and represented. In other words, what may appear as resident self-selection or inadequate participation may actually be closer to pure selection by service providers, as they aim to structure the downstream decision-making calculi

of potential participants. Whereas problems of self-selection or inadequate participation typically motivate responses that focus on spreading awareness and increasing the availability of services,<sup>6</sup> unpacking discretion and its cumulative consequences necessitate a fundamental rethinking of how services should be provided in the first place (Bell 2017; Soss and Weaver 2017). This article concludes by discussing policy implications for alleviating critical sources of inequality in policing and service provision across institutional contexts.

#### COMPLAINTS AS ENDORSEMENTS

On June 25, 2015, Commissioner William Bratton unveiled the NYPD's Neighborhood Policing Plan. However, neighborhood policing was not the only reform possible. Following community protests against the chokehold killing of Eric Garner, elected officials introduced a package of police reforms. Proposals included mandating NYPD submission of quarterly reports on uses of force and requiring officers to identify themselves and their justifications during police stops (Mays 2015). However, in testimony and interviews, Commissioner Bratton characterized these additional reforms as "overkill" (Jorgensen 2015) and as "unprecedented intrusions into the [NYPD's] operational management" (Mays 2015). Instead, Bratton insisted that neighborhood policing "will change many aspects of how cops and community interact—and thereby address many of the concerns that underlie the bills we're considering today" (Mays 2015). In other words, in the aftermath of Eric Garner's killing, neighborhood policing represented the department's primary strategy for managing grievances on the ground.

Whether referred to as a dispute, lawsuit, claim, or grievance, complaints are a fundamental mechanism for how people identify and attempt to rectify injurious experiences. Complaints arise in a variety of institutional contexts, including companies (Dobbin and Kelly 2007), universities (Abu-Odeh, Khan, and Nathanson 2020), and prisons (Calavita and Jenness 2013). Different actors with varying goals construct complaints—imbuing them with and drawing from them different meanings, claims, and representations.

Table 1 presents my framework for the varying perspectives toward a complaint. Existing scholarship has primarily conceived complaints as either (1) grievances or (2) liabilities. First, complaints can represent vehicles to express grievances personally or collectively (Felstiner et al. 1980; May and Stengel 1990). Whether the desired outcome is individual-level restitution or broader social reform, complaint submitters seek change. Second, complaints

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Forman (2004, p. 2) argues that community policing "has not reached its potential" because "a critical group—youth and young adults—has largely been left out." In contrast, this article's findings suggest that community policing is likely *closer* to its potential precisely because critical groups have been strategically included and excluded.

TABLE 1  
 FRAMEWORK OF VARYING PERSPECTIVES TOWARD COMPLAINTS

Party	Conception of Complaint	Desired Outcome
Complaint submitter	Grievance	Restitution/reform
Accused parties	Liability	Complaint minimization
Complaint manager	Endorsement	System reinforcement

can represent liabilities, which prioritize the perspectives of accused parties and implicated stakeholders. While *complaint submitters* use complaints to communicate grievances or injurious experiences, complaints from the viewpoint of *accused parties* carry risks, threats, and liabilities.

Police invitation of community complaints to manage legitimacy requires an alternative conception of complaints beyond grievances or liabilities. Complaints as endorsements prioritize the view of *complaint managers*—that is, service providers, oftentimes institutional actors, who receive and adjudicate complaints. Whereas complaint submitters seek restitution or reform by expressing grievances through complaints, and while accused parties aim to minimize liabilities, complaint managers typically seek to entrench their positions by representing complaints as endorsements of their services.

Specifically, when their services are consumed, complaint managers can make claims about the high demand for their services—which is key to drawing the support and resources needed for organizational survival and public legitimacy. For example, when 311 agencies release statistics about the number of requests they resolved (NYC311), the goal is to demonstrate demand for their services and their effectiveness in mediating complaints about noise, blocked driveways, and other disputes by complaint submitters against accused parties (NYC311 2018). In a variety of settings from local politics to community-based organizations, entities leverage claims making about the demand for their services to get elected, win resources, demonstrate effectiveness, and gain local influence (Marwell 2004; Walker and McCarthy 2010; Levine 2016). Thus, rather than seeking restitution or complaint minimization, complaints as endorsements is *system reinforcing*: complaint managers seek to claim the organizational legitimacy that complaint submission confers to them.

These varying conceptions of complaints provide predictions for understanding how service providers handle complaints. Typically, complaint managers will invite complaints, which can be represented as endorsements of their services—for example, 311 agencies promote their services and invite complaint submission. However, when the complaint manager is also the accused party, incentives are no longer aligned: complaint managers now face liabilities and will seek complaint minimization. In other words, whereas complaints *to* managers provide opportunities to exercise core services and

represent such service provision as public demand, complaints *about* managers motivate more defensive orientations toward these complaints. For example, calls accusing 311 agents themselves of poor quality would no longer represent endorsements of their services; instead, agents are more likely to conceive these complaints as liabilities that must be minimized. Similarly, while the incentives of human resource managers already align with the company's managerial interests by default (Edelman 1992; Edelman, Erlanger, and Lande 1993), they have a heightened motivation to "smooth" and squash cases when they themselves are the target of workplace grievances. As described next, complaint managers employ strategic decision-making practices to proactively minimize these problematic cases.

#### CUMULATIVE DISCRETION

As service providers exercise discretion across multiple decision-making points, the consequences accumulate, in a process that I refer to as "cumulative discretion." The concept of cumulative discretion highlights the connected decision-making practices that unite seemingly discrete stages, actors, and institutions: compounding inequalities in housing exchange (Korver-Glenn 2018), circular entanglements in child support and incarceration (Haney 2018), and triaging in frontline medical care (Lara-Millán 2014). In these examples, and in service provision generally, frontline actors make multiple decisions with cumulative consequences for processes like service eligibility, program compliance, and case resolution. These decisions, which promote service uptake and dropout in nonrandom ways, are often incentivized as necessary for organizational survival (Lipsky 1980).

This article builds on scholarship on public service provision by analyzing how police operationalize cumulative discretion as they mobilize community complaints. Desmond and Valdez (2013, p. 120) explain how police discretion is "largely invisible to citizens, supervisors, and scholars alike." Examining when and how cumulative discretion in policing operates requires tracing the production of community complaints from a neighborhood meeting through the police department's organizational bureaucracy. Figure 1 illustrates the key discretionary points that cumulatively filter and construe the type of complaints that police process.

First, officers must decide where to hold meetings. Police likely take advantage of the reality that holding meetings in certain locations will likely attract associates of that particular venue. Doing so shapes the types of complaints that are raised in the first place. This process, which I refer to as *stakeholder selection*, emphasizes the importance of venue selection by the police as a factor shaping residents' self-selection into meetings. For example, when determining meeting locations, police are likely to tap into their relationships with neighborhood institutions: religious centers (Pattillo-McCoy 1998;

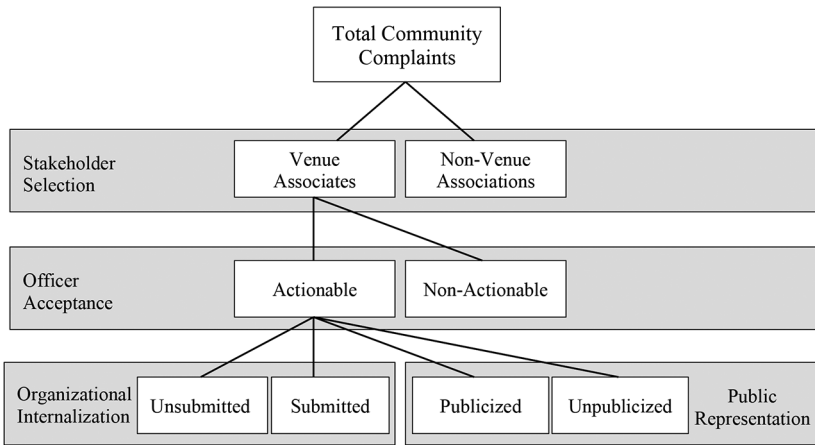


FIG. 1.—Cumulative discretion over community complaints

Brunson et al. 2015), local schools (Rios 2011), and social service providers (Stuart 2016). While holding meetings in particular locations may be practical (e.g., size of venue, convenient location), recurrent meetings in the same types of venue would indicate strategic decision-making.

In fact, research repeatedly emphasizes how police discretion is guided by how officers conceive their role vis-à-vis the stakeholders they seek to satisfy (Crank and Langworthy 1992)—such as responding to teachers reporting threatening students (Rios 2011) or hassling the homeless into megashelters (Stuart 2016). Selecting venues where hosts have previously called upon police for help increases the likelihood of cooperative audiences in meetings. Venue hosts also gain from smooth meetings: pastors, school principals, and business owners want to protect relationships with officers to continue receiving enforcement services. With their goals aligned, police likely select venues with hosts who will invite attendees demanding greater police services.

Second, out of the complaints that attendees actually voice during meetings, officers must decide which are suitable for intervention. This process of *officer acceptance* filters the pool of complaints for those perceived as actionable. Unlike 911 calls dedicated to emergency services, the bounds of what constitutes an actionable complaint in community meetings is not well defined. The ambiguity of the police’s work—rooted in the status of the police as society’s “or else” (Bittner 1990, p. 11)—is amplified in community meetings, where police invite any and all issues aimed at neighborhood improvement. In fact, research in Los Angeles’s community meetings revealed how police and residents vie over whether an issue is “policeable” (Gascón and Roussell 2019). Nonetheless, police retain ultimate decision-making power



over whether to provide services, deploy scripts, or remain silent in response to resident requests (Cheng 2020).

Another factor that facilitates officer discretion over a complaint's actionability is the level of department control over the complaint process. Envisioned as opportunities to build organic relations through open discussion and collaborative problem solving, police-community meetings lack the accountability of external complaint submission processes—such as 311 and civilian complaint review boards—which provide residents with tracking numbers, documentation, and mandatory follow-up by the agency. Nonetheless, since community meetings are a department-sponsored channel for public input, all complaints raised within them are valuable because police can control how complaints are translated, recorded, and represented. Even if a complaint is not policeable, or it must be “burden shuffled” to another agency (Herring 2019), the role and contribution of police can be strategically affirmed regardless.

Third, out of the acceptable complaints, officers will likely only submit the subset they are comfortable being held accountable for by their supervisors. After meetings conclude, the process of *organizational internalization* begins: officers exercise wide discretion over whether and how to document meeting discussions, complaints, and solutions. The subset of complaints that are organizationally internalized form the foundation of what supervisors learn are the most important neighborhood problems and which community issues officers should be prioritizing. As a classic principal-agent problem, supervisors can only hold officers accountable for the complaints that officers record.

At the same time, organizational priorities endogenously established within police departments foreseeably shape how officers come to view which community complaints should be rationally internalized in the first place (see Edelman, Uggen, and Erlanger 1999). Explicitly, supervisors communicate organizational priorities to officers by, for example, emphasizing the political stakes of the program's success—such as referring to an initiative as “my baby” (Herbert 2006, p. 2). Implicitly, supervisors can communicate organizational priorities through the paperwork that officers must complete. For instance, in New York, officers were required to document their rationale for stop-and-frisks by marking all the checkboxes that applied—rather than providing an explanation in narrative format. This mode of documentation facilitated a “suspicion script” of patterned checked boxes correlating with race and neighborhood factors (Fagan and Geller 2015). Examining the paperwork that officers must complete to document complaints would likely reveal the organizational priorities and institutional myths communicated to officers about what constitutes acceptable neighborhood policing (Crank and Langworthy 1992; Edelman et al. 1999).

Finally, police are likely to *publicly represent* only certain meeting discussions through social media posts. As policy makers call upon police to utilize social media as a community engagement tool (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015), departments foreseeably curate postings to promote specific narratives of policing. In doing so, strategic online posts can help socialize the public and legitimize police activities (Cheng 2021). Online posts often constitute the only public record of community meetings, which enhances their communicative power because police can selectively summarize issues, stage photos, and pursue other online strategies to demonstrate public demand for police services. Importantly, public representations may or may not match the complaints recorded in internal records.

Thus, this study tracks how officers exercise cumulative discretion across these stages to construe community complaints as endorsements of police services. These decisions are not just sequential—they are cumulative in consequence: (1) meeting locations shape attendance, which narrows the pool of likely complaints; (2) out of the complaints raised, officers accept only some as actionable; (3) after meetings, officers internalize a subset of actionable complaints within organizational records; and (4) officers publicly represent only particular discussions and complaints on social media. Filtering, reframing, and omitting complaints facilitate convergence *through* exclusion: (1) convergence between the group of returning attendees who come to make requests that actually align with the police’s meeting goals, via (2) exclusion of ultimately one-time attendees who raise issues that the police are not interested in addressing. These decisions are shaped not merely by the merits or substance of a complaint, but by how it will affect the institutional legitimacy of the police.

#### POLICE-COMMUNITY INITIATIVES AS LEGITIMACY MANAGEMENT

The decision-making practices described above are unfolding against a backdrop of high-profile cases of police violence—pushing American policing into a crisis of public legitimacy (Weitzer 2015). Legitimacy is the “generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, p. 574). For police, as social control agents, legitimacy is critical for eliciting cooperation and compliance (Becker 1963; Tyler 2004). As public scrutiny intensifies, police departments across jurisdictions are introducing a variety of community initiatives aimed at expanding public contact in nonenforcement contexts (Peyton, Sierra-Arévalo, and Rand 2019).

History reveals that police have previously turned to community initiatives for legitimacy management following high-profile police violence. In

the 1990s, cities across America began implementing “community policing” in earnest following the televised beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles and the establishment of the Department of Justice’s Community-Oriented Policing Services (Skogan 2006; Gascón and Roussell 2019). Analogous to how Rodney King’s beating correlated with the first wave of community policing initiatives in the 1990s, the police killings of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and several others in the 2010s have renewed attention on community initiatives. Regardless of their mixed record of success (Gill et al. 2014), community initiatives continue to receive policy support and resources in the aftermath of police violence (e.g., Beck and Rice 2016). Most recently, after Minnesota police officer Derek Chauvin squeezed the air out of George Floyd over the course of eight minutes, Joe Biden proposed investing \$300 million in community policing (Budryk 2020). With community initiatives here to stay, researchers must examine how policing inequalities are “actively produced through modes of governance” (Soss and Weaver 2017, p. 567; Bell 2017). In other words, what affirmative things are police departments doing to maintain a particular social order?

This study examines America’s largest police department and its Neighborhood Policing Plan, which it describes as the “the largest change to the NYPD since CompStat in 1994” (New York Police Department 2018).<sup>7</sup> The primary changes included dividing the city’s 77 precincts into four or five smaller sectors with two neighborhood coordinating officers (NCOs) per sector; assigning “steady sector” officers to respond to 911 calls, which freed NCOs to deal with community issues; and holding quarterly Build the Block meetings within each sector to receive community complaints. Unlike past community policing initiatives, which officers have viewed as not “real” policing, the NYPD’s Neighborhood Policing Plan designates NCOs as officers within the core patrol bureau—as opposed to a separate community division—and provides them with detective training that could fast-track them toward a detective’s badge (Bratton 2015).

Studying neighborhood policing is thus critical because nonenforcement initiatives are precisely those that policy makers encourage police departments to adopt (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing 2015). How these initiatives are implemented has important implications for the allocation of police services. Because community complaints are a consequential occasion for police-community exchange (Herring 2019), analyzing how officers understand the role of community complaints is key to unpacking variation in which and how neighborhood issues are resolved.

<sup>7</sup> Introduced by the NYPD in 1994, CompStat was a new system for police departments to keep track of crime rates and to hold officers accountable for their assigned areas (see Weisburd et al. 2003).

DATA AND METHODS

From joining police departments (Moskos 2008) to exploiting crime classification decisions (Desmond and Valdez 2013), scholars have employed a variety of methods aimed at rendering police discretion visible. This article leverages unique data sources to uncover police discretion through their real-world actions (Jerolmack and Khan 2014) and traces how that discretion cumulatively operates to manage community complaints. Specifically, I constructed a data set consisting of (1) verbalized complaints, (2) complaints recorded on meeting whiteboards, (3) complaints submitted in internal write-ups to supervisors, and (4) complaints publicly represented on Twitter.

First, to better understand meeting dynamics, I conducted ethnographic observation of meetings in two pseudonymous precincts: the 55th and 80th Precincts. I chose these two precincts after randomly selecting and attending police-community meetings in a quarter of the precincts (six out of 23) in Brooklyn, which is New York City’s most diverse and dense borough. Empirically, these two precincts were promising case studies because they drew some of the largest audiences, fielded the most 311 and 911 calls, and had the highest crime rates of the six considered. Table 2 presents selected demographic and crime information of the two precincts, which are presented as approximations to preserve their anonymity.

While additional differences existed between the two precincts—for example, the median rent in the 55th Precinct was increasing faster because of its proximity to Manhattan—they shared more similarities than differences: both areas have a history of intensive policing despite recent reductions in crime and violence; both contain a variety of housing types from large projects to brownstones; and both feature strong African-American and Democratic political leadership. In fact, once on the ground, I realized that these two precincts were actually part of the same broader African-American and West Indian community: many residents lived in one and

TABLE 2  
SELECTED DEMOGRAPHIC AND CRIME DATA FOR THE 55TH AND 80TH PRECINCTS

	POPULATION	% BLACK	% FOREIGN-BORN	2018		2019	
				Major Felonies Rate	Murder Rate	Major Felonies Rate	Murder Rate
55th Precinct . . . . .	150,000	87	50	1,150	4	1,050	5
80th Precinct . . . . .	90,500	58	30	1,250	2	1,130	15
Brooklyn . . . . .	2,560,000	34	37	1,071	4	1,093	4
NYC . . . . .	8,300,000	26	37	1,150	3.5	1,147	3.6

NOTE.—Major felonies and murders are presented as rates per 100,000 residents. Data are taken from the U.S. Census and the NYPD and are presented as approximations to protect the anonymity of precincts.

worked in the other, cultural events like parades spanned both precincts, and nonprofits and community organizers often approached both neighborhoods as a single catchment area. While I was initially interested in how officer discretion in community meetings varied across these two precincts, the findings revealed more consistency than variation—reflecting the common organizational dynamics and institutional incentives shaping officer discretion across neighborhoods.

Between April 2018 and September 2019, I heard residents vocalize 294 complaints in 40 meetings across the two precincts' nine sectors. Because Build the Block meetings are public, I audio recorded meeting discussions and transcribed them afterward. As seen in the bottom photo of figure 2, NCOs were supposed to record complaints on a whiteboard, which I photographed ( $N = 26$  meetings). In practice, NCOs did not use whiteboards



FIG. 2.—Example of post-Build the Block tweet, NYPD Housing PSA 8 Twitter. Color version available online.

in some meetings (“nonboard meetings”).<sup>8</sup> I also retrieved tweets summarizing meetings directly from the precincts’ official Twitter accounts ( $N = 27$  meetings). Tweets are usually posted after meetings are over and summarize meeting discussions by either broadly describing the meeting’s success or specifically listing the complaints that residents raised (fig. 2).

NCOs also submit formal write-ups of meetings to supervisors called “Neighborhood Policing Meeting Reviewed,” which I requested via FOIL for each of the meetings I attended. Because the NYPD only implemented this practice in the first half of 2018, forms existed for only 37 of the 40 meetings I attended. These forms, which were submitted electronically to supervisors at NYPD headquarters, asked NCOs to track various meeting details. Most relevant here, NCOs reported the complaints raised during meetings, including crime type, location, description, date and time, and the NCO’s plan to address it. NCOs did not include each and every complaint in their formal meeting write-ups. I define “actionable complaints” as those that were (1) board recorded within board meetings; (2) board unrecorded within board meetings, but which NCOs submitted in formal write-ups; and (3) submitted in formal write-up for nonboard meetings. “Organizationally internalized” complaints refer to all complaints submitted in a formal write-up to NYPD supervisors. I complemented ethnographic observations and FOIL documents with interviews ( $N = 58$ ) with various community leaders, clergy, activists, and others I met through a variety of police-community events within the 55th and 80th Precincts.

Finally, because ethnographic observations suggested that meeting location shapes attendance and the complaints raised, I constructed a data set of every Build the Block meeting and location across New York City through the third quarter of 2019—the end of my fieldwork period ( $N = 2,207$  meetings). I constructed this data set by scraping meeting information (date, time, and address) from each precinct’s Twitter and Facebook pages, which posted meeting information as invitations to residents. I used meeting addresses to code for venue types, like religious institution, community center, and public library. When precincts did not post meeting information for a quarter, I coded these observations as missing. My data set contains 92% of the most liberal estimate of total meetings held—2,406 meetings—based on the department’s approximation of “over 1,500 meetings” through 2018 (New York Police Department 2018). Together, these varied data provide innovative sources for uncovering how police exercise cumulative discretion to cultivate complaints as endorsements.

<sup>8</sup> Reasons for NCOs not using the board in some meetings include forgetting the whiteboard or markers in the precinct, the venue lacking a space to hold up the board, or the “recording NCO” was engaged in side conversations with venue hosts and residents throughout the meeting. These reasons did not appear to systematically bias the complaints that were ultimately internalized in organizational write-ups or public representations.

## FINDINGS

The findings below are presented in three sections. First, I describe how holding meetings in particular venues (“venue selection”) means that certain types of stakeholders are more likely to come (“stakeholder selection”), with implications for the types of complaints raised. Second, zooming in on the complaints raised, I show how a process of complaint attrition emerges as NCOs differentially record, construe, and omit complaints based on whether they can be represented as endorsements of police services in internal records and public representations. Third, these meeting dynamics shape the pool of residents returning to meetings, who begin to proactively regulate audience discussions to discourage complaints by newcomers about over- and unequal policing. Together, these findings emphasize the significance of officer discretion and its cumulative consequences in mediating the promised potential of police-community meetings.

### Venue Selection as Stakeholder Selection

The locations where NCOs make themselves and their services available are an important source of discretion that reveals which neighborhood institutions police view as legitimate and suitable for partnership. Because every NCO must hold quarterly meetings and advertise them ahead of time, NCOs rely on a set of community partners that permit reservations of sizable meeting spaces. At the same time, as argued below, NCOs cultivate these relationships as sources of complaints unlikely to raise issues of police reform and overpolicing and likely, instead, to approach the police as a solution to neighborhood issues.

Across New York City, the most common venue for Build the Block meetings was religious institutions (table 3). On the one hand, NCOs explained that they chose these locations for practical reasons. For example, churches can accommodate large audiences and are reservable several weeks in advance. Precincts also have long-standing relationships with local religious institutions, as they often coordinate police presence during weekend services and arrange street closures and permits every year for religious holidays. Relationships often originated from past enforcement events, such as when nearby churches and housing complexes called 911 or when NCOs requested surveillance footage from them to help solve cases. Religious institutions and other top venues are thus practical choices for holding Build the Block meetings.

But at the same time, the comparatively high frequency of Build the Block meetings in religious institutions—seven times more than in social service venues—indicates the unique advantages that clergy relationships provide to police. In fact, in the first quarter of 2019, NYPD headquarters issued a “location rotation guideline” that directed NCOs to vary meeting locations because, by default, NCOs were holding meetings in the same

TABLE 3  
 FREQUENCY OF BUILD THE BLOCK BY VENUE TYPE

VENUE TYPE	TOTAL	
	<i>N</i>	%
Religious institution . . . . .	673	30.5
Housing complex . . . . .	333	15.1
Educational institution . . . . .	312	14.1
Community center . . . . .	250	11.3
Commercial business . . . . .	235	10.6
Public library . . . . .	143	6.5
Charity/social service provider . . .	95	4.3
Hospital/health center . . . . .	58	2.6
Civic/fraternal association . . . . .	41	1.9
Government agency office . . . . .	41	1.9
Cultural association . . . . .	13	.6
Museum . . . . .	9	.4
Precinct stationhouse . . . . .	4	.2
Total . . . . .	2,207	100

NOTE.—Total % exceeds 100 due to rounding errors. The data are from the author’s calculations using meeting addresses scraped from NYPD tweets and Facebook posts.

exact locations. Nonetheless, even after being directed to alter locations, NCOs still selected religious institutions as their most common venue type.

Examining how meetings in religious institutions actually unfold provides insight into why they represent ideal venues for police-community meetings. First, religious institutions provide an engaged audience that NCOs can access through local pastors. NCOs leverage a culturally familiar setting, especially in African-American communities (Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Meares 2002), to access an audience of already active congregants who subscribe to established leadership hierarchies. NCOs and venue hosts often make arrangements to hold Build the Block meetings at the same time as regularly scheduled venue events, such as Bible study. For example, before introducing the NCOs to start one Build the Block meeting, the pastor apologized to them for the low turnout: “I just have to apologize because we thought that all our Bible study people would be here—30–40 people—but somebody sent out an email and it was misread that Bible study was cancelled. But we thank God for those who are gonna come, and we’re looking forward to what you have to say” (Sector 55B, June 2019). The apology reveals both the mutual understanding that more attendees were promised and the value the pastor places on the church’s relationship with the officers. After apologizing, the pastor announced, “Now if you wouldn’t mind, this is how we start off Bible study.” Without further instructions and in complete unison, everyone in the audience knew to stand, bow heads, and hold hands with the person next to them. With the Bible study regulars who were present, the Build the Block



meeting started with prayer, just like any other church event. The pastor then scrambled to text the remaining Bible study members to come.

Second, as NCOs cultivate relationships with faith-based leaders, pastors endorse NCOs to congregants as solutions to neighborhood problems. Anywhere from one to three times a week, NCOs visit churches to personally check in and offer their services (Henry interview, December 12, 2018). During Build the Block meetings, pastors then recount their positive interactions with police and encourage their congregants to assist police efforts. For example, in a meeting in Pastor Henry's church, attendees remained quiet when the NCOs asked if anyone had complaints. Pastor Henry then stood up, walked into the church's middle aisle, and stood in between the officers and audience. He explained that there was drug dealing on the block and "the way to stomp it is to foster that relationship between the police. We're not just to see the police as the enemy, but we see the police as our ally—that we work together" (Sector 55C, November 2018). Pastor Henry recounted how he provided the NCOs access to the church's surveillance system and has since seen a decline in drug activity.

Pastors then help conclude Build the Block meetings as they started it: with prayer. These prayers request protection and blessing over officers: "We recognize that every day, our officers place their lives in the line of danger for our community, and so we pray for your continued grace and protection" (Sector 55C, May 2018). Again, infusing prayers for police into community meetings blurs meeting experiences with church-sponsored events. Together, these practices orient attendees to the spirit of collaboration and police appreciation that NCOs and pastors aim to cultivate.

Thus, across New York City, NCOs recurrently hold Build the Block meetings in the same places for practical reasons—for example, their size and capacity to be reserved—as well as for the strategic reason that venue selection amounts to stakeholder selection. NCOs strengthen this correlation between venue selection and stakeholder selection by relying on hosts to post meeting flyers around their venues and by using sign-in sheets from past meetings as the invitation lists for future meetings. Rather than maximizing variation, NCOs in almost every meeting ask attendees to "invite your friends" and "bring your neighbors" (e.g., Sector 80C, May 2018). With the venue and stakeholders selected, NCOs are next ready to strategically receive actual community complaints.

### Complaint Attrition

Build the Block meetings are designed to improve community relations by receiving community complaints that can be addressed through existing police services. While the department refers to Build the Block meetings as "public safety meetings," NCOs typically focus on quality-of-life complaints:

“We understand that sometimes . . . a problem you may be having in your area may not be the worst crime in the world—quality-of-life stuff is very big because if it affects your living, it’s something we want to help you resolve” (Sector 55A, September 2018). By providing examples, NCOs prime attendees about what complaints are appropriate: “We’ve had cars towed, people that have derelict vehicles on their block, we’ve had neighbor disputes we’ve helped mediate and resolve, and we’ve had speedbumps put in” (Sector 55B, August 2018).

Successful complaints, however, require officer acceptance and organizational internalization. Figure 3 illustrates the flow of complaints from verbalization by residents, board recording by NCOs during meetings, and formal submission to supervisors afterward. Meetings feature complaint attrition. Out of 294 verbalized complaints, NCOs only submitted 45.6% in organizational records. In other words, in the 1.5 years of Build the Block meetings observed, 54.4% of complaints never reached a supervisor’s desk. The rate of organizational internalization is lower than the percentage of complaints NCOs accepted as actionable (60.5%), which is calculated by adding all the complaints that NCOs board recorded or submitted (see app. A). These patterns of complaint attrition persist at both the precinct and sector levels.

Complaint attrition is not completely random. While police-community meetings like Build the Block events are presented as initiatives for police reform, only 8.8% of all complaints raised demanded reforms to overpolicing. Even when raised, however, these complaints were less likely to be organizationally internalized: while NCOs did not submit 54.4% of all complaints, those demanding police reform were unsubmitted 88.5% of the time (fig. 4).

Explaining these disparities requires analyzing meeting dynamics between the point when complaints were vocalized and when they were internalized. The remainder of this section examines the decision-making processes behind both (1) unsubmitted complaints and (2) submitted complaints, which cumulatively promote complaint attrition in strategic ways.

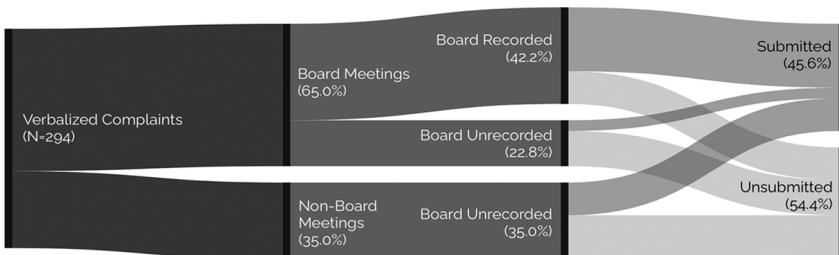


FIG. 3.—Flow of total complaints from verbalization to submission. Data are taken from the author’s calculations using the author’s FOIL request. The thickness of lines is proportional to the percentage of complaints. Color version available online.

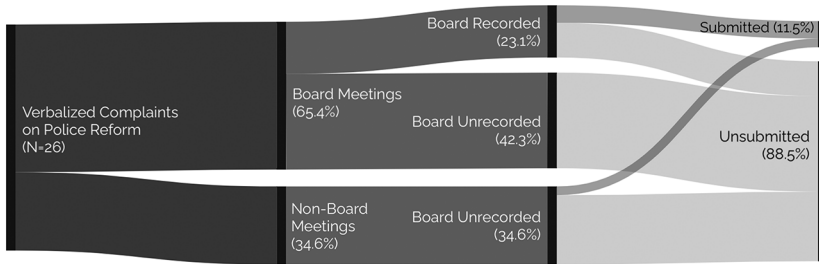


FIG. 4.—Flow of complaints on police reform from verbalization to submission. Data are taken from the author’s calculations using the author’s FOIL request. The thickness of lines is proportional to the percentage of complaints. Color version available online.

*Unsubmitted complaints.*—NCOs interpret complaints demanding police reform as discussion questions and hurdles to meeting progress. Compounding the consequences of venue selection as stakeholder selection, residents who manage to attend meetings then face NCOs who *are* willing to discuss police reform but *not* formalize them in records. NCO discussions of police reform are patterned, featuring (1) *individualization* of controversial episodes of police misconduct: “I can’t speak for every police department, every cop in the entire country” (Sector 55C, May 2019); (2) *humanization* of officers: “We’re all human beings too, we all have emotions, we all have our own experiences” (Sector 55C, August 2019); and (3) *personalization* of services: “I look at it as a way for you guys to have a cop in your pocket. Essentially, someone you call up, you can text directly saying ‘hey this is what’s going on in my area, and we need some help with it’” (Sector 55A, May 2018). This recurrent conversation about police reform and misconduct lingers so much in meetings that NCOs refer to it as “that discussion” or “that kind of chat” (Sector 55C, May 2019) on “policing and the climate and today” (Sector 55B, June 2019). While NCOs are prepared to hold the conversation, they view it as a topic they must “squash” (Sector 55C, May 2019) before making actual meeting progress. Meetings are forums for residents to consume police services—not complain about them.

For example, two weeks after officers fatally shot an unarmed African-American male with bipolar disorder, a resident asked the NCOs: “As part of your program, what are you doing to protect this community from the NYPD?” (Sector 80A, April 2018). NCO Allen replied with a flippant tone: “You’re saying, what the NYPD is doing to address people with bipolar disease?” After the resident explained that their question centers on police accountability, NCO Allen described mandatory department training on responding to emotionally disturbed persons. Growing impatient, NCO Petroni—who had been pacing and listening behind his partner—stepped in: “I understand what you’re saying, it was very unfortunate what happened

in the 8-5 Precinct, but this meeting is not about this, alright, this meeting is about—.” The resident interrupted, stating that they consider this a “safety issue.” NCO Allen acknowledged that what happened was an “all-around tragedy,” but “I give my six-year-old a kiss every day and I don’t know if I’m coming home at night. . . . I’m not here trying to get any sympathy from anybody, but you understand that our job as a police officer is a very complicated situation, and if we decide to use deadly, physical force, [it’s] obviously our last resort.”

NCO Allen reiterated that “I can’t speak for the 85th precinct, I can only speak for the 8-0 precinct.” NCO Petroni then quashed the discussion: “To answer your question ma’am, what are we doing to remedy that kind of situation—this is the remedy. . . . We’re getting to know the community, that is what we’re doing to solve that problem.” In other words, complaints about police do not need to be recorded or submitted because the neighborhood policing program already exists to resolve them. Indeed, the NCOs neither board recorded nor formally submitted this exchange in organizational records.

Public representations of meetings further omit critiques of policing from the public record. For instance, the 80th Precinct tweeted about the above meeting with NCO Allen and Petroni by describing the “great turnout” and posting photos of the NCOs in front of the audience pointing to raised hands. The tweet omits mention of the resident’s complaint about the precinct’s steps to prevent another police shooting. Similarly, after a Sector 55B meeting, the precinct tweeted about the topics discussed: automobile safety, illegal parking, and crime prevention strategies.<sup>9</sup> The tweet ended with “#NYPD is listening!” Yet at least half of the meeting was dominated by a first (and last) time attendee’s complaints about why police shoot to kill, why officers always rest their hands on the firearms on their belt, and for how long NCOs plan on staying in the neighborhood (Sector 55A, April 2018). By focusing solely on the complaints calling for greater police assistance, the 55th Precinct’s tweet erases this discussion about police behavior from the meeting’s public record.

In turn, NCO resistance to complaints about overpolicing can discourage residents from returning to meetings. In Sector 80B, a resident named Marcus asked: “What’s the purpose for unmarked cars riding around in Brooklyn? . . . These unmarked cars, Fords, young guys, stopping random cars—for no reason” (Sector 80B, May 2019). Interpreting the question literally, NCO Mora responded: “Their purpose is to prevent crime just like the regular marked cars.” In fact, Mora explained that officers always have more information, and “so maybe you don’t know the reason for the stop,

<sup>9</sup> The specific text or photo of the tweet is not shown to protect the anonymity of the precinct.

but that officer does.” NCO Geller joined in: “Those are the same guys who are getting the guns off the street, who are going on those major calls of robberies, shots fired, people getting shot, those are those guys.” Later, Marcus raised an issue of “excessive ticketing” against Black drivers. NCO Mora asked what was the violation—no signaling—and stated that “when you receive a ticket with the NYPD, you can fight it in court.”

Marcus was unsatisfied: “I’m saying it’s the community at large feeling pressure from the increase in cops in this community. . . . I’ve been stopped unjustly, ticketed unjustly. So what do you officers suggest is the recourse—go to traffic court?” NCO Mora reiterated: “If you receive a summons for any violation, if you feel like you unjustly—doesn’t matter if you’re Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, whatever it is—if you received a summons and you feel like you didn’t deserve it, you fight it in court.” Despite Marcus explicitly connecting his complaints to broader issues of gentrification and overpolicing, the NCOs instructed Marcus to defer to officers’ motives and pursue existing legal remedies. These complaints were board recorded as “unmarked cars—why?” and “tickets.” Neither were submitted in formal write-ups.

During this meeting, the 80th Precinct tweeted a reminder to come, raise concerns, and hear how police are maintaining the neighborhood’s safety. In fact, the tweet’s time stamp reveals that it was posted after Marcus’s complaint. Like NCO Geller’s response, the tweet omits the possibility that the police are *not* enhancing safety. I later asked Marcus whether he believed the NCO’s board recording of his complaint as “unmarked cars—why?” accurately captured it. He explained that “these aren’t earnest answers” and instead he believes that a more genuine response would have asked: “What happened exactly? Tell me, what did the car look like? Did you get a picture of it? Did you get his information? We’re gonna look into why they pulled you over” (Johnson interview, June 20, 2019). When I asked Marcus if he plans on attending the next meeting, he replied, “I don’t know” and mentioned how his friends will not because “it is a waste of time.” This was, in fact, the last meeting that I observed Marcus attend.

By approaching complaints calling for police reform as discussion questions and hurdles to meeting progress, NCOs discourage residents like Marcus from returning. Next, to further uncover the police’s affirmative goals in police-community meetings and how they guide cumulative discretion, the following section analyzes the complaints that were actually submitted.

*Submitted complaints.*—Understanding why complaints about reforming overpolicing and unequal policing remain unsubmitted requires unpacking how officers construed the complaints that they did submit. NCOs are more likely to accept a complaint as actionable if they can translate it into an administrative or criminal violation that justifies police intervention. For example, a Sector 55A meeting containing two board-recorded complaints is typical of

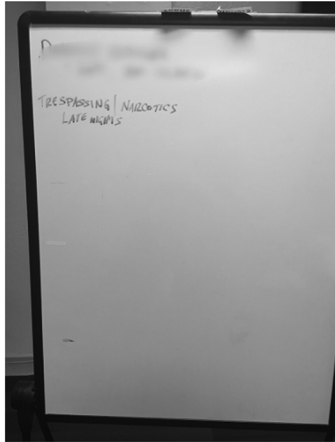
how NCOs inject legal language when translating and board recording complaints. First, a resident described a parking issue with regard to ad hoc “mechanic shops” occupying parking spots with cars that lack license plates (Sector 55A, September 2018). Despite not being verbalized as such, NCOs translated and board recorded the complaint as “derelict vehicles”—formal terminology that justifies police action. In the formal write-up, NCOs submitted the complaint as “body shop leaving abandon [*sic*]/derelict vehicles parked in the street all day.” They proposed to “speak to body shop owner. If problem persists, will proceed with Aggressive Tow operations.”

The only other board-recorded complaint was raised after NCOs primed residents—priming them on actionable complaints: “Any other issues? Noise complaints? People loitering? Marijuana? Stuff like that.” A resident finally complained about the slow police response to gang members entering her building and smoking. The NCOs explained that they can stop by more often and will contact the building superintendent to secure a building key. At the end of the conversation, the resident again criticized the police’s hour-long response time: “If there’s a gunshot, the whole place floods. But when you tell them what’s going on, an hour? That’s ridiculous.”

Despite being a complaint about the quality of police services, the NCOs recorded it in a way that would more likely increase the quantity of police officers. As seen in figure 5, during the meeting, the NCOs board recorded the complaint as “Trespassing/Narcotics—Late Nights.” This translation omits the issue of officers’ delayed response and reframes it in the formal legal language of trespassing and narcotics. After the meeting, NCOs submitted the complaint as two separate issues: one of trespassing and one of marijuana. To address both complaints, the NCOs proposed conducting “75C/75I,”<sup>10</sup> issuing summonses, and making arrests if necessary. How NCOs translate, record, and submit complaints sets the bounds of possible solutions to neighborhood issues. Here supervisors seeing a cluster of trespassing and marijuana complaints may assign more officers to the area rather than improving the response times of those already there. These examples thus emphasize the asymmetric control officers exercise over submitted complaints: once a complaint is verbalized, NCOs can construe it in whatever way they like, which often aligns with them creating opportunities to affirmatively exercise police services.

However, even if NCOs wanted to record a complaint about the police’s delayed response, the records make it difficult to do so. Figure 6 illustrates the drop-down list of “crime type” options that NCOs can choose from when recording complaints. Options include “conditions” like abandoned vehicles,

<sup>10</sup> The numeral “75” is the NYPD radio signal code for “visibility patrols,” with “C” referring to “community visits” and “I” referring to “interior” because the complaint is about the inside of a building.



**Neighborhood Policing Meeting Reviewed**  
Meeting ID: \_\_\_\_\_

**Crime Type:** Trespass  
**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date/Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail:**  
 Complaints from community regarding individuals who do not live in the building hanging out in the lobby and hallways and blocking main entrance to the building every day during evening hours.

**Plan to address Crime/Condition:**  
 Complete 75C / 75I at location and issue summonses and make arrests if necessary.

---

**Crime Type:** Marijuana Use/Sale  
**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date/Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Detail:**  
 Complaints about individuals smoking marijuana inside/outside of the building at every day during evening hours.

**Plan to address Crime/Condition:**  
 Complete 75C / 75I at location and issue summonses and make arrests if necessary.

FIG. 5.—Example of a complaint’s board recording (left) and organizational record (right). Author’s photograph (left) and composite from FOIL request (right). Color version available online.

**NYPD** Neighborhood Policing Portal

**Crime Condition:**

**Type: \*** Please select a value.

**Location: \*** Abandoned/Detritu/Unregistered Vehicles  
 Bar/Nightlife

**Date/Time: \*** Bicycle (On the sidewalk, Roving Bands, etc.)  
 BBQs

**Detail:** Burglaries  
 Car Break-ins  
 Commercial Parking  
 Controlled Substance Use/Sale (Crack, Cocaine, Heroin, etc.)  
 Dirt Bikes  
 E-Bikes  
 Gambling  
 Graffiti  
 Homeless Issues (Encampments/Shelters/Panhandling)  
 Larcenies  
 Lighting/Scaffolding Conditions  
 Littering/Disorderly Groups  
 Mailbox Fishing  
 Marijuana Use/Sale  
 Noise  
 Other Crime  
 Other Parking (Blocked Driveways, Double Parking, etc.)  
 Other Quality of Life (Vendors, Untaxed Cigarettes, Dog Off Leash, etc.)  
 Prostitution  
 Requests for Services/Info (CCTV, Neighborhood Watch, etc.)  
 Sanitation Issues (K9 Waste/Public Urination/Illegal Dumping)  
 School Issues (Dismissals/Fights)  
 Traffic Violations (Speeding, Red Lights, etc.)  
 Trespass

**Plan to Address:**

➔ Add Additional Crime/Condition

FIG. 6.—Options for “crime condition type” on internal Build the Block forms. Author’s FOIL request.

dirt bikes, and homeless issues. Missing from this list are issues that point to the police department itself as a possible source of community complaints.

In organizational write-ups to supervisors, NCOs not only documented complaints calling for more police services, but their proposed solutions recommended that they provide these very services. Across the 134 complaints submitted in formal write-ups, NCOs generally proposed seven types of solutions (table 4). The most common solutions suggested were greater police presence, often through increased patrols (27.2%); calling upon another NYPD department or government agency (25.7%); and enforcement action like writing summonses or towing vehicles (24.5%). Importantly, despite enforcement action being explicitly proposed in only a quarter of written complaints, officers often stated in meetings that they may be NCOs, but “at the end of the day, we’re cops,” who must enforce the law (Sector 55D, June 2018).

The monopoly that NCOs exercise over determining solutions to the community complaints raised in their meetings is further revealed when

TABLE 4  
FREQUENCY OF NCOs’ PROPOSED SOLUTIONS IN FORMAL WRITE-UPS

Proposed Solution	Example	<i>N</i> (%)
Increase police presence	“NCO Eddie will conduct directed patrol within the vicinity of the church and schools.” (Sector 55E, December 2018)	72 (27.2)
Interagency/department forwarding	“will forward complaint to DOT [Department of Transportation].” (Sector 55B, September 2018)	68 (25.7)
Enforcement action	“conferral with S.O.L [Special Operations Lieutenant] to conduct S.N.E.U Op [Street Narcotics Enforcement Unit Operation] at the location.” (Sector 80A, July 2019)	65 (24.5)
Mediation/nonagency outreach	“Will speak to other residents at location and advise them about illegal dumping and come up with a solution amongst the residents.” (Sector 55D, September 2019)	33 (12.5)
Provide literature	“NCOs provided attending community members with literature containing strategies to protect against identity theft. NCOs also discussed monitoring credit reports and bank accounts.” (Sector 55C, February 2019)	13 (4.9)
Contact NCOs/311/911	“Gave contact info to complainant, asked him to reach out to nco while noise is happening for quicker response.” (Sector 80B, November 2018)	9 (3.4)
Follow-up	“NCO will keep in contact with complainant and attempt to obtain footage from the building super.” (Sector 80C, March 2019)	5 (1.9)
Total		265

NOTE.—Complaints could involve multiple proposed solutions. Data are from the author’s calculations using the author’s FOIL request.



they (1) choose not to intervene when residents want police services and (2) impose solutions with which residents disagree. First, residents cannot compel NCOs to pursue enforcement when officers decline. For example, in Sector 80B, an elderly resident named Eva explained how “for 15 years, they [church attendees] have abused a privilege of double parking” (Sector 80B, May 2019). Specifically, congregants double park outside her building during every church service—impeding disabled tenants from entering and exiting, preventing deliveries, and forcing a caterer who lives in the building to carry her food across the street to load her vehicle.

However, the NCOs did not want to take enforcement action and instead proposed: “I want to set up a meeting between you and the head of the church, and that’s the answer that I can give you at this moment.” The NCOs repeated this solution in their formal write-up. In an interview, Eva explained that the issue would unlikely be resolved because the precinct’s community affairs officers attend the specific church (Diaz interview, May 14, 2019). Furthermore, the previous quarter’s Build the Block meeting was held in the church—reflecting the prioritized relationship that NCOs share with venue hosts, especially churches. Like Marcus, this was the last meeting that I observed Eva attend.

A second indicator of the police monopoly over solution determination is when NCOs pursue solutions despite resident opposition. For example, three gang-related shootings within Sector 80A drew almost 30 residents to a Build the Block meeting. When residents asked what they could do to improve neighborhood safety, the NCOs explained:

*NCO Petroni:* We need you guys to reach out to us, text us, call us, if you see something . . . some kids smoking in the park—call 911. That doesn’t mean that kid’s getting arrested. It doesn’t mean he’s getting a summons.

*NCO Musa:* We’re just gonna make it uncomfortable.

*NCO Petroni:* We have discretion—no one can take it away from us. . . . I see a 15-year-old kid in the park, and he’s not a gang member, I’m gonna let him off with a little warning. But if he’s BGK [a local crew], he’s getting arrested. . . . I don’t care, they’re taking a ride with me. It is what it is. (Sector 80A, April 2019)

Residents challenged the approach as “a Band-Aid” that will not “cultivate long-term safety that builds a true community.” One resident asked whether “you think there’s value in that”—referring to taking the kid to the precinct. NCO Petroni responded “absolutely, 100 percent” and explained: “We’re gonna sit there with you for two hours, and we’re gonna talk for two hours.

Not to mention, it's gonna be probably another hour and a half before you're back in Sector Adam [Sector 80A] because your mom is not gonna pick you up—and now you gotta deal with her. So yeah, it's worth it.” Neither this conversation nor any mention of gang violence appears in the formal write-ups, which only listed a noise complaint, package thefts, and various traffic issues. In a tweet afterward, the 80th Precinct posted that the NCOs met with residents to discuss “public safety issues.” Residents simultaneously sought neighborhood safety and expressed discomfort with aggressive policing that targeted a subset of youth. However, the NCOs' strategy was already decided.

### The “Familiar Faces” of Meeting Attendees

As NCOs operated meetings in the ways described above, meetings became increasingly dominated by returning residents who actually made requests that aligned with police goals in these meetings. To begin a Sector 55D meeting, the NCO explained: “The Build the Block is if anybody has any questions, most of you guys are familiar faces, but anything, any questions or concerns” (Sector 55D, June 2018). Because NCOs hold meetings in a rotating list of locations with a consistent set of residents, NCO introductions across sectors grew briefer over time with many welcoming back “familiar faces.”

These familiar faces viewed meetings as opportunities to win services from police as service providers (see Skogan 2006; Bell 2020). Expressing frustration with unresponsive calls to 911 and 311, these residents often attended their first meeting after learning about it from venue hosts—like pastors—and aimed to convince NCOs to prioritize their particular issue. Some even cited tweets from adjacent precincts to argue that other NCOs were actually responding to particular complaints, like illegally parked cars (Sector 55D, February 2019). Even if NCOs did not resolve the resident's issue immediately, NCOs and venue hosts encouraged residents to return because persistence is key: “The squeaky wheel gets the oil” (Sector 55B, December 2018). If NCOs did provide the services requested, then residents would often voluntarily return to meetings to “publicly thank these two officers” by testifying about their successful experience and consciously boosting the NCOs' attendance numbers (Sector 55D, September 2019). In fact, when attendance is low as meetings begin, returning residents would often begin dialing neighbors to come because it was “embarrassing”: the community must “show out” for the NCOs for them to remain interested in providing services (Sector 55B, April 2018).

The socialization within meetings can be seen in how familiar faces picked up on and adopted police vernacular. Familiar faces could often be identified by the way they pronounced numbers: many began stating numbers by their

individual digits the same way officers do. For example, instead of referring to their address as “one hundred and twenty-fifth street” or to the “eighty-first precinct,” they would state “one two five” or the “eight one” precinct.” Similarly, familiar faces would often begin referring to precinct leadership as the “CO” and “XO”—meaning commanding officer and executive officer—as officers do when alluding to their supervisors.

As NCOs cultivated relationships with a recurring subset of residents, these familiar faces—not NCOs—often grew impatient and intervened when first-time attendees expressed concerns of overpolicing. In a Sector 55D meeting, regular attendees began complaining about loud motorcycles riding up and down the street. Clinton, a first-time attendee, expressed an alternative view: “I’m hearing all of these complaints, especially the bikes, I must tell you officers, this is not one of my major concerns because these guys need pleasure time.” Immediately, one resident scoffed; another responded, “That’s why they have parks”; and a third pointed out, “You know they don’t have licenses, right?” NCO Owens explained that “my motorcycle is registered and insured, and I don’t drive it like a maniac.” Clinton then explained how he wanted to create a nonprofit to help youth find employment. Again, residents replied: “They don’t want help . . . [they] are destroying the whole neighborhood.” Several others expressed “mm-hmm” in agreement. Like others reported on in this article, this was the last meeting that I observed Clinton attend. Thus, the key point is not that it is invalid for residents to want a police response to loud motorcycles but rather that community voices like Clinton drop out from the process as the consequences of police discretion accumulate.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Amid intensifying public scrutiny, police are curating complaints—not ignoring them—from constituents strategically cultivated through community initiatives. Guided by their conception of complaints as endorsements of services, police exercise discretion across multiple stages, which accumulate in consequence: (1) where meetings are located and who attends, (2) which complaints are accepted as actionable, (3) which complaints are submitted in organizational records, and (4) how meetings are publicly represented online. Across over 2,000 meetings in New York City, officers decided to hold Build the Block meetings in religious institutions at least two times more often than any other venue type. NCOs cultivated relationships with local pastors, in particular, as a first step toward mobilizing demand for police services. Out of 294 complaints vocalized within meetings, approximately half were organizationally internalized (45.6%) and half were unsubmitted (54.4%). For complaints seeking police reform to over- and unequal policing, these disparities widened: 88.5% of these complaints were never documented.

Complaints that NCOs actually submitted and publicly represented online were also patterned: they either demanded—or were construed to demand—opportunities to affirmatively exercise police services.

An empirical implication of this study is that the complaints submitted to police can actually be organizationally beneficial to the task of legitimizing policing. As rule enforcers who must constantly justify their institutional existence (Becker 1963), police invite complaints on neighborhood issues because the complaints empower them with options on whether and how to act. What matters in this analysis is not so much the state's exchange of people per se (Lara-Millán 2017) but rather the complaints that people represent and the claims-making opportunities available based on them. These community complaints, when submitted in designated channels and requesting greater police assistance, affirm police authority regardless of whether police pursue classic enforcement, burden shuffle to another agency (Herring 2019), or deflect (Cheng 2020). The remaining complaints that police cannot record and represent as endorsements can either be reframed into an enforcement framework or excluded from internal records and public representations altogether.

This study further highlights how institutional actors are legitimacy optimizers—not maximizers—who prioritize legitimacy with only the subset of the public needed to maintain organizational imperatives of survival and independence. Across a variety of democratic and nondemocratic entities, the goal of optimizing legitimacy promotes strategies like cooptation (Selznick 1949), buffering (McDonnell and King 2013), bargaining (Lee and Zhang 2013), and other forms of elite empowerment (Lederman 2019; Levine 2017) that undermine institutional change by strategically permitting forms of participation. In this case, the bureaucratic processes of dealing with public input reveal rituals that formally justify police practices and frame accountability to a curated community. By analyzing cumulative discretion and the decision-making dynamics emerging in moments of institutional crisis, future studies can continue interrogating how organizations strategically reorganize broader accountability and responsiveness around people, complaints, or other units of intervention that help “disappear” (Lara-Millán 2021) particular understandings of the crisis at hand. Doing so may help better identify the intersectional racial and class credentials that secure inclusion into the curation processes of police departments and other racialized organizations (Ray 2019).

The dynamics described above around cultivation, curation, and cumulative discretion are foreseeably generalizable across institutional contexts beyond police—for example, how health officials cultivate trust to motivate participation in new public health initiatives (Vargas 2016), how firms curate reviews when measuring client satisfaction, or how the cumulative discretion of census takers may systematically undercount or exclude respondents. To take the Title IX context, various institutional actors likely shape the

types of complaints that victims submit, how they are investigated, and the range of resolutions possible. Federal officials, campus police, Title IX officers, university administrators, resident advisors, and service providers all have visions of the appropriate complaint process and foreseeably exercise cumulative discretion to shape victim decision-making to align with institutional goals beyond the substance of the case (Abu-Odeh et al. 2020; Brown 2019; Richards 2019). For instance, whereas campus police may view complaints as endorsements and encourage victims to formalize complaints, university administrators and Title IX officers likely do not—motivating them to undercount cases (see Timmermans 2005) and “smooth” (Edelman et al. 1993) misunderstandings between students. Either way, these decision-making practices can render initiatives that focus on expanding service awareness, availability, and familiarity among students less useful and undermine the potential of new laws, policies, and protections intended for institutional change.

Nonetheless, when police specifically mediate public pressure for reform, critical implications arise about their role in securing or undermining community vitality. When community initiatives are envisioned by policing organizations and enacted by police officers in the ways described above, nonenforcement contact promotes inequalities that become symbiotic with the inequalities generated from police enforcement. As the armed representatives of the state, the police’s capacity to endure largely unchanged, despite intensifying demands for reform, can erode democratic values of public input and daily realities of personal safety (Bell 2017; Soss and Weaver 2017).

### Policy Implications

This study shows how officer practices can skew the landscape of neighborhood issues that supervisors hear and the data that scholars analyze. These findings suggest that the vast amount of administrative data increasingly available through both police partnerships and public access must be scrutinized as any internal document would be: recognizing that their reliability is bound by the circumstances of their production (see Knox, Lowe, and Mummolo 2020). Such scrutiny is particularly important during formal evaluations of police practices—moments when institutional mythmaking (Meyer and Rowan 1977) can claim to become evidence based. Greater specificity over what organizational records are actually evidence of is critical given that community complaints, 911 calls, and other reports form the basis of policy, practice, and knowledge production.

This study specifically suggests that police-community meetings are ultimately a poor gauge of representative preferences for police practices. In 2019, Heather Mac Donald of the Manhattan Institute testified before the House Judiciary Committee: “Go to any police-community meeting in a high-risk community and you will hear the good people there beg the police to

get the drug dealers off the streets, to clear the corners of rowdy youth, and to crack down on loud music and illegal street parties” (Mac Donald 2019). On the one hand, Mac Donald’s testimony masks the exceptional amount of officer discretion shaping meeting attendance, complaint recording, and public representations. Such discretion stems from the organizational imperative to maintain legitimacy amid intensifying public scrutiny. Procedural justice elements, like participation and voice (Tyler 2004), are irrelevant if individual and organizational incentives persistently motivate actors to induce complaint attrition in new ways (see Owens and Ba 2021).

At the same time, however, as participants like Marcus, Eva, and Clinton stop attending meetings, Mac Donald’s testimony becomes increasingly accurate—reflecting the fundamental challenge in relying on police-community meetings as a representative source of public input. While beyond the scope of this article, multiple activist residents I interviewed as part of a larger project described Build the Block meetings as “a waste of time,” “the same bullshit,” “totally useless, I mean just silly,” and “one of the ways in which NYPD propaganda gets put out to the world.” As meeting dynamics discourage segments of residents from returning, those that remain genuinely seek police services and advance police goals of legitimacy management. Indeed, as the NYPD tweets about the tens of thousands of New Yorkers who have attended Build the Block meetings or testifies at budget hearings about holding 2,000 meetings to build stronger community relationships (O’Neill 2019),<sup>11</sup> police-community meetings become increasingly valuable because of—not despite—these meetings dynamics.

As communities across America reckon with social justice and police transformation, this study emphasizes the importance of investing in *non*-police-sponsored channels for public input (Cheng and Qu 2022). This could take the form of community control and power over police (Rahman and Simonson 2020) or developing polling technology that measures police approval in greater detail (Weichselbaum 2018). At the same time, unsettled questions about institutional design (how much community control, board appointment/election processes, etc.) and data transparency (Wiggers 2020) complicate both of these approaches, especially as police organizational strategies would need to update to account for these new initiatives. Nonetheless, expanding mechanisms for public input outside of department channels is key because police-sponsored initiatives can suffocate community voice—rendering street protests one of the only options for public input.

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., Rodney Harrison (@NYPDChiefPatrol), “More than 30,000 New Yorkers have attended a #BuildtheBlock meeting with their Neighborhood Coordination Officers. Check <https://btb.nypdonline.org> to see when one is happening in YOUR community. We want to hear from you how we can keep your neighborhood safe.” #*NeighborhoodPolicing* [Photos attached]. Twitter, November 14, 2018, 9:10 a.m., <https://twitter.com/NYPDChiefPatrol/status/1062754779015847937>.

Finally, while institutional actors may produce unintended consequences, their decisions are not intentionless. Disentangling the role of negligence versus intention in these processes is an important future step toward alleviating nonrandom attrition and the inequalities these practices reinforce. While this study was limited to two precincts in New York City, it generated important hypotheses that can be tested at scale. For example, a first step in future studies is to incorporate surveys or other new forms of data to determine how representative the complaints raised in police-community meetings are compared with those in the broader community. Furthermore, while this study found consistency in the organizational dynamics shaping cumulative discretion, future studies should trace how cumulative discretion varies—if at all—across neighborhoods, cities, and institutional contexts beyond police. As the model of neighborhood policing in New York City diffuses to the modal police departments across America (see DiMaggio and Powell 1983), key differences may arise in organizational priorities, mechanisms, and practices between policing's largest bureaucracies versus those in smaller towns. These legitimacy projects will also likely be racialized in different ways, opening new questions into the options and strategies available to excluded voices. Ultimately, focusing on processes like cumulative discretion can help scholars and policy makers better explain and dissolve the persistent connections between participatory initiatives and institutional inequalities.

APPENDIX A

TABLE A1  
FREQUENCY OF VERBALIZED COMPLAINTS BY TYPE IN TOTAL, PRECINCT LEVEL, AND SECTOR LEVEL

	TOTAL	55TH PRECINCT					80TH PRECINCT					80TH PRECINCT				
		A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	E	A	B	C	D	
N meetings	37	21	16	5	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	3	5	3	5	
N complaints verbalized	294	170	124	32	24	49	24	48	45	20	48	48	37	11	28	
Board meetings	191	91	100	21	17	0	17	0	3.3	20	48	(100)	(83.8)	(63.6)	(50.0)	
	(65.0)	(53.5)	(80.6)	(65.6)	(70.8)	(.0)	(70.8)	(.0)	(73.3)	(100)	(100)	(100)	(83.8)	(63.6)	(50.0)	
Board recorded	124	60	64	9	10	0	10	0	2.6	1.5	27	27	26	5	6	
	(64.9)	(65.9)	(64.0)	(42.9)	(58.8)	(.0)	(58.8)	(.0)	(78.8)	(75.0)	(56.3)	(71.4)	(83.9)	(71.4)	(42.9)	
Submitted	80	41	39	7	6	0	6	0	1.7	1.1	13	18	18	4	4	
	(64.5)	(68.3)	(60.9)	(77.8)	(60.0)	(.0)	(60.0)	(.0)	(65.4)	(73.3)	(48.1)	(69.2)	(80.0)	(83.3)	(83.3)	
Unsubmitted	44	19	25	2	4	0	4	0	9	4	14	8	1	2	2	
	(35.5)	(31.7)	(39.0)	(22.2)	(40.0)	(.0)	(40.0)	(.0)	(34.6)	(26.7)	(51.9)	(30.8)	(20.0)	(33.3)	(33.3)	
Board unrecorded	67	31	36	12	7	0	7	0	7	5	21	5	2	2	8	
	(35.1)	(34.1)	(36.0)	(57.1)	(41.2)	(.0)	(41.2)	(.0)	(21.2)	(25.0)	(43.8)	(16.1)	(28.6)	(57.1)	(57.1)	
Submitted	13	8	5	3	1	0	1	0	0	4	0	0	1	1	3	
	(19.4)	(25.8)	(13.9)	(25.0)	(14.3)	(.0)	(14.3)	(.0)	(.0)	(80.0)	(.0)	(.0)	(20.0)	(50.0)	(37.5)	
Unsubmitted	54	23	31	9	6	0	6	0	7	1	21	4	1	5	5	
	(80.6)	(74.2)	(86.1)	(75.0)	(85.7)	(.0)	(85.7)	(.0)	(100)	(20.0)	(100)	(80.0)	(80.0)	(62.5)	(62.5)	
Nonboard meetings	103	79	24	11	7	49	7	49	12	0	0	0	6	4	14	
	(35.0)	(46.5)	(19.4)	(34.4)	(29.2)	(100)	(29.2)	(100)	(26.7)	(.0)	(.0)	(.0)	(16.2)	(36.4)	(50.0)	
Submitted	41	26	15	2	4	18	4	18	2	0	0	0	4	2	9	
	(39.8)	(32.9)	(62.5)	(18.2)	(57.1)	(36.7)	(57.1)	(36.7)	(16.7)	(.0)	(.0)	(.0)	(66.7)	(50.0)	(64.3)	
Unsubmitted	62	53	9	9	3	31	3	31	10	0	0	0	2	2	5	
	(60.2)	(67.1)	(37.5)	(81.8)	(42.9)	(63.3)	(42.9)	(63.3)	(83.3)	(.0)	(.0)	(.0)	(33.3)	(50.0)	(35.7)	
Actionable complaints	178	94	84	14	15	18	15	18	28	19	27	31	31	8	18	
	(60.5)	(55.3)	(67.7)	(43.8)	(62.5)	(36.7)	(62.5)	(36.7)	(62.2)	(95.0)	(56.3)	(83.8)	(83.8)	(72.7)	(64.3)	
Org. internalized	134	75	59	12	11	18	11	18	19	15	13	23	7	16	16	
	(45.6)	(44.1)	(47.6)	(37.5)	(45.8)	(36.7)	(45.8)	(36.7)	(42.2)	(75.0)	(27.1)	(62.2)	(63.6)	(57.1)	(57.1)	
Total unsubmitted	160	95	65	20	13	31	13	31	26	5	26	14	4	12	12	
	(54.4)	(55.9)	(52.4)	(62.5)	(54.2)	(63.3)	(54.2)	(63.3)	(57.8)	(25.0)	(72.9)	(37.8)	(37.8)	(36.4)	(42.9)	

NOTE.—“Actionable complaints” equal the sum of board-recorded, board-unrecorded/submitted, and nonboard meetings/submitted. “Org. [organizationally] internalized” complaints equal the sum of all the submitted. Data are from author’s calculations using author’s FOIL request. Data are presented as  $n$  (%) unless otherwise indicated.



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