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The State from Below: Distorted Responsiveness in Policed Communities

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Abstract

This paper uses a new technology, “Portals,” to initiate conversations about policing between individuals in communities where this form of state action is concentrated. Portals are virtual chambers where people in disparate communities can converse as if in the same room. Based on over 800 recorded and transcribed organic conversations across ten neighborhoods in five cities, we analyze patterns in discourse around the police and policing. Our intention in asking respondents to discuss their experiences with police is not to develop a new theory of policing or to better understand social or neighborhood organization. There is already a robust literature exploring how Americans in highly policed spaces understand and respond to police (e.g., Weitzer 2017, Bell 2016, Stuart 2016, Epp, et al. 2014, Rios 2014, Goffman 2014, Meares 2009, Brunson and Miller 2006). Neither do we attempt to plumb the determinants of how people come to conclusions about the legitimacy fairness or legality of police. Rather, our goal in closely analyzing these conversations is to uncover how people who experience state authority through policing characterize democratic governance in our time through mapping citizens’ experiences with and views of the state; how they judge the responsiveness of authorities, and their experience-informed critiques of democracy. Our study is, therefore, distinctly political as opposed to sociological, psychological or legal even while it clearly is in conversation with prior work in these arenas.

Our study makes two related contributions, one methodological and one theoretical. Methodologically, we argue that observing through Portals real conversations of ordinary people largely unmediated by the researcher allows us to transcend certain limitations of traditional, survey-based techniques and to study politics in beneficially recursive ways. Theoretically, we demonstrate that Portals participants characterize their relationship with the police in a way we

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2
3 label “distorted responsiveness” and that this characterization leads organically through their
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5 conversations to more general characterizations of their broader relationships with the state that
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7 we believe are foundational to developing a fuller understanding of democracy in action. In
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9 short, by focusing on how individuals experience Citizenship in the City through their ordinary
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11 experiences with municipal bureaucrats who figure prominently in their lives we can develop a
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13 theory of the State from Below.
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19 **Introduction**

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21 It is fair to say that 2014 marked a turning point in the way many United States residents
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23 viewed policing as an institution. On August 9, 2014, unarmed teenager Michael Brown was
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25 shot and killed by a White police officer in Ferguson, MO, and by December of that same year,
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27 video footage of Eric Garner’s choking death in Staten Island, New York blanketed social media
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29 and more traditional news outlets. In response to these events, President Obama convened the
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31 first national commission in the nation’s history devoted to policing (President’s Task Force on
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33 21st Century Policing 2015), and seven months after Michael Brown’s death, the United States
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35 Department of Justice completed its investigation of the City of Ferguson’s police department
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37 concluding that nearly every aspect of law enforcement in the city was marked by
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39 unconstitutionally discriminatory practices driven by an impoverished municipal tax structure in
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41 which police were directed to engage in tactics designed to fill city coffers (United States
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43 Department of Justice & Shaw 2015).
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49 In the years since, scholars have sought to understand and respond to the national
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51 conversation regarding racialized policing, the seeming newly discovered – at least to those not
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53 regularly subjected to such violence – regularity of police violence against citizens (especially
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3 citizens of color), the prevalent practice of using police stops of citizens to balance municipal
4 budgets in a world of declining state and local tax revenues (Gordon & Hayward 2016), and
5 rampant levels of low-level police engagement of citizens through tactic such as “stop and frisk”
6 justified by police executives as necessary to lower crime levels (Fagan, et al. 2016, Fagan and
7 Geller 2015). Some research focuses on the psychological dynamics of how people understand
8 the legitimacy of these legal authorities (e.g., Tyler et al. 2014, Meares 2008), while sociological
9 accounts attend to the ways in which residents of heavily policed spaces both negotiate and call
10 upon police and how police practices shape patterns of social networks (e.g. Bell 2014, Stuart
11 2016, Rios 2014, Tyler, et al. 2014, Brunson 2007, Brunson 2006). Another abiding focus of
12 research in this field seeks to explain police motivations and resulting citizen mistrust in terms of
13 racial discord (Weitzer 2017) or legally impermissible race discrimination (Carbado 2015).
14 There have been, however, few systematic analyses of the outlooks, frames, and visions of the
15 groups of people most affected by the police practices institutionalized over the last 20 years and
16 how people reason from their understandings to their political agency more generally (Soss &
17 Weaver 2017).

18
19 Thus, three primary questions motivate our paper: What discourses and ideologies do
20 “race-class subjugated communities” draw on to make sense of their interactions with street-level
21 bureaucrats (Soss and Weaver 2017)? How do they reinterpret dominant discourses around the
22 state and political authority to “better fit the realities” of their lived experience (Dawson 2001)?
23 How do people in highly policed neighborhoods then come to understand state authority, and
24 how do they characterize the logic and role of the state?

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26 We explore answers to these questions using a new technology, “Portals,” which allows
27 people to have conversations with one another about policing and incarceration in communities

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3 where these forms of state action are concentrated. We analyze patterns in collective political
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5 discourses around the police gathered from Portals. Our analysis suggests that those who live in
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7 places most marked by criminal justice practices and crime characterize their relationship with
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9 the key institution of government present in their daily lives – the police – as one colored by
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11 *distorted responsiveness*.
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15 The account we offer below is not an ethnography of people’s experiences (Goffman
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17 2014, Rios 2011) or a more general qualitative exploration of heavily-policed individuals’
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19 attitudes regarding policing (Solis, Portillos, and Brunson 2009, Brunson 2007, Brunson and
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21 Miller 2006). Neither are we seeking to explain contemporary criminal justice practice generally
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23 (e.g., Simon 2007) or urban policing (Beckett & Herbert 2010) or a particular kind of police
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25 encounter (Epp, et al. 2014). Instead, our account builds on Soss and Weaver’s (2017) call to
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27 understand citizen interaction with police as political, as constructive of our civic identities,
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29 political actions, and thought. In particular, the notion of “distorted responsiveness” provides a
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31 more general understanding of the relationship our subjects have with government, importantly
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33 affecting their understanding of themselves as citizens (Justice and Meares 2014).
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38 The paper unfolds this way: First, we describe the Portals themselves and posit reasons
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40 for seeing them as an important innovation methodologically and substantively. Next, we spell
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42 out how we used Portals to engage citizens in civic dialogues about the police. In this section we
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44 describe our sites and our approach to the data. The last section presents a qualitative analysis of
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46 data from about 800 transcribed conversations in urban neighborhoods in five cities. Here, we
47
48 introduce the distorted responsiveness concept and its foundation in a changed policy landscape.
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50 This concept not only illuminates how citizens encounter police, but also broader insights about
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52 the nature of democratic responsiveness.
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Theoretical Foundation & Argument

To understand the significance of our argument, a useful starting place is the typical rendering of democratic governance in the U.S., and ways in which that approach occludes the experience of policed communities, and therefore, citizenship in the city.

Robert Dahl, in his canonical treatment, described the democratic ideal as: “continued responsiveness of the government to the preferences of its citizens, considered as political equals” (Dahl 1971, p.1). The state must give equal weight to each citizen’s views. Since Dahl wrote, the study of state/citizen relations has reflected this conception of political equality in its central questions, its measurement strategies, and its concern for the health of democracy more broadly. A prominent translation of Dahl’s ideal concerns whether citizens have equal influence in the policies of government, but importantly, not the actions of authorities beyond the legislature. As study after study has shown, the democratic ideal is violated when the preferences of the poor and middle class are only rarely translated into policy outcomes, resulting in a government skewed to the rich (Bartels 2016; Gilens 2012; Hacker & Pierson 2010; Winters & Page 2009). Whether government registers the preferences of its citizens and delivers them policy goods, then, has become singularly important in research. As such, most literature on democratic citizenship operates along one dimension: attention or inattention from government, typically its classically liberal face.

The result of this tendency is the concern of our study.

Our critique focuses on what the dozens of studies taking the Dahlian approach do not tell us due to three key unstated and interrelated assumptions. One is that the state is generally beneficent, if sometimes aloof. A second assumption follows from the first – more connection to

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3 government is always better than less, or, as Dahl said, “an equal *distance* of all citizens to
4 government,” (italics ours). A third assumption is that political alienation flows from *not being*
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6 *heard* by elected officials rather than from some other state activity. Taken together, democratic
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8 inequality is the mere absence of equal voice, responsiveness, and, therefore, influence.
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12 These assumptions have shaped (and confined) research questions and outcome
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14 measurement in political science. Researchers have focused on the institutions that are designed
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16 to register the people’s legislative will rather than citizen interaction with bureaucrats and other
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18 state actors who carry out policy. Following from this focus, researchers have highlighted
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20 dependent variables that capture narrow political behaviors such as voting and engagement with
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22 elected representatives. An assumption that the state generally is beneficent in its response to
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24 citizens can lead to several conclusions about the most pressing threats to democracy. Bartels
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26 (2008) worries about the share of citizens in the bottom of the class order who do not have their
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28 policy preferences registered in policy outcomes, while Mettler (2011) is concerned about the
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30 how a “submerged state” method of delivering vital provision causes people to overlook the
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32 ways in which government, through important social policies, does many things to benefit them.
33
34 Hacker and Pierson (2010) argue that institutional arrangements enable wealthy individuals and
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36 groups to have disproportionate influence on achieving their desired policy outcomes (and
37
38 increasingly so). Each of these accounts suggest that the democratic state’s fundamental flaw is
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40 that it fails to provide adequate goods and resources to its poorest citizens; however, such
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42 accounts neglect the fact that the government “goods” the poorest citizens often do receive are
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44 surveillance and punishment.
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51 If we designate beneficent policies the government advances in response to citizens
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53 preferences the “first face of government,” then the ways in which the polity has over time
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3 expanded and deepened its commitment to regulation, coercion, surveillance and discipline can
4 be considered government's "second face." (Soss & Weaver 2017). Our argument is that a full
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6 accounting of democratic government must include how citizens experience its second face, so
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8 attention to preference responsiveness simply will not provide a complete picture of the structure
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10 and authority of the American state over individuals. As political scientists Jamila Michener
11
12 (2018) and Joe Soss (2011) have highlighted in their own work, how authorities in educational,
13
14 social, labor market and correctional institutional contexts treat individuals (as suspicious or
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16 innocent, as a subject or a principal, as worthy or protection or expendable) must be considered
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18 alongside whether representative institutions are equally responsive to different constituent
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20 groups. Focus on this dimension naturally raises the question of how people conceptualize
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22 government as a function of their actual treatment by government bureaucrats.
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29 In this paper, we trace one very prominent conception of the nature of state activity that
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31 results from this arrangement, which we term "distorted responsiveness" to how people
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33 characterize their own relationships with government more generally. The government actor of
34
35 concern here is police. Our respondents were not focused primarily upon whether police
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37 responded when called for service. Instead, participants in our study experienced authorities as
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39 contradictory, both everywhere and nowhere. Police authority was most energetic where it didn't
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41 matter for their lives – busting people for selling 'loose squares' or other minor transgressions.
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43 At the same time, these authorities were out of reach and unresponsive when they were "steady
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45 dyin." From their conception of police directly flowed a conception of government. For those
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47 who described distorted responsiveness, their conception of government, then, was predicated on
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49 this dual position of being abandoned and overseen, unprotected and occupied. And from their
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51 observations of distorted responsiveness of police, respondents slid easily into more general
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3 conceptions of government. They were “up for the taking,” regularly “fleeced,” and ignored
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5 because their racial position made them negligible actors in the political system.
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8 The concept of distorted responsiveness we describe here has echoes in literature in other
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10 contexts. In writing of the twinned “abuse of legal power and the withholding of laws to protect
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12 Blacks,” Wendy Brown-Scott (1994) has referred to “state lawlessness.” The political scientist
13
14 Lisa Miller (2015) describes Blacks in the United States as living in a “failed state,” experiencing
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16 both high levels of unremediated social risk that lead to violence and actual state violence and
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18 incarceration. But these authors do not focus on the ways in which particular experiences with
19
20 local authorities and bureaucrats are conceptually important to how people theorize about their
21
22 own and their community’s relationship to government, sense of standing and place in broader
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24 narratives of state power. Criminologists, too, have detailed experiences that young people in
25
26 particular have with “over and under policing,” but that literature does not have as its aim a
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28 more general theory of how individuals think about their relationship to the state and instead
29
30 plumbs an understanding of social organization of communities and neighborhood structure
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32 (Brunson & Miller 2006, Walker 2000, Brunson 2007).
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38 Therefore, our aim in this paper is to say something about citizenship in the city today
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40 through mapping citizens experiences with and views of the state. We argue that the Portals
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42 dialogues unsettle literature in American politics by exposing a second dimension, namely,
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44 treatment by authorities representing the second face of the state. By listening to the way in
45
46 which people in real, unstructured conversation with one another theorize government as a
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48 means to “keep niggas down where they at in whatever way you can, make 'em mad, get 'em in
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50 they feelings” they are not mounting a challenge that “our preferences aren’t registered,” we see
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3 they are describing state power and government as it actually occurs and exists in their
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5 communities.
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8 If we want to understand governance, state power, civic standing and freedom in the city,
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10 we need to study how people interact with government differently, which we turn to now.
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14 **What are Portals?**

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17 Portals are gold shipping containers containing technology that allows people who are
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19 geographically disconnected to occupy the same virtual space and converse as if in the same
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21 room.¹ The gold shipping containers can be placed anywhere – in a neighborhood, in a
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23 community gathering spot, in a public square, art gallery, college campus, or county jail. Upon
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25 entering the dark chamber, a participant is connected by life-size video and audio in real time
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27 with a complete stranger in an identical gold shipping container in another city or country,
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29 creating the illusion of being in the same room with someone who may be, in fact, on the other
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31 side of the world. A Portal is designed to be a highly intimate, secure space in which participants
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33 can be fully present. Participants are able to read one another's full body language, to make eye
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35 contact, to bond over shared or divergent lived experiences, or to confront difficult political
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37 issues in collaboration with each other.
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42 In April of 2016, we launched the Criminal Justice Dialogues, placing two Portals
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44 installments in our pilot sites: Moody Park in Milwaukee, WI and Military Park in Newark, NJ.
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46 Later that year, we incorporated a new Portal in the Bronzeville/Grand Boulevard area of
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48 Chicago, IL and by mid-2017, a Portal was operating in Lexington Market in Baltimore, MD, in
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50 downtown Los Angeles, CA, and Mexico City, Mexico.² To date, we have collected
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52 approximately 866 conversations in six cities.
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6 *Where, Who and When*
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8 We attempted to locate Portals in areas with high concentrations of police-citizen
9 encounters, though there is significant variation in police activity and the people who entered a
10 Portal across cities, across sites within each city, and even within a single location.³ For example,
11 we observed conversations between an upwardly mobile working class Latino student population
12 at CSU Dominguez Hills founded after the Watts riot and residents of Milwaukee's Amani
13 neighborhood located in the 53206 zip code, which has the highest share of incarcerated Black
14 men in America. Portals participants experienced policing approaches that varied from one
15 reformist regime after high profile scandals (Los Angeles) to one in the midst of oversight by
16 federal government (Baltimore) to one in the midst of a high-profile adjudication and activism
17 after a teenager was killed by police (Chicago and Milwaukee). Additionally, the Portals were
18 also moved *within* cities during the study period to inhabit neighborhoods with very different
19 local histories, levels of police presence, and social relations among residents.
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35 Around a single portal, there was dynamism. Consider the Baltimore Portal, which drew
36 in former gang members, budding activists, artists, college students, working class people on
37 their way to work, and sex workers. The Portal was sited in an area that contained a bus stop
38 shuttling residents to all parts of the city, an open-air drug market, a methadone clinic, and a
39 social justice oriented cooperative and radical bookstore. In Los Angeles, one Portal site sat at
40 the intersection of a housing project, a halfway house, and a community-inspired food market,
41 drawing in police officers, second generation immigrants, as well as ex-inmates on ankle
42 monitors. Another Portal site in L.A. drew in those from a nearby homeless encampment, people
43 passing through on their way to work, and lawyers visiting the law library.
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3 In addition to their location, the Portals captured multiple forms of variation. First,
4 because Portals dialogues involve at least two people in direct conversation with one another,
5 there is variation among the participant pairings themselves. The pairings span generations, race
6 and class position, and gender in addition to variation between the Portals' locations. Second,
7 Portals capture differences not just in city spaces, but in the *same neighborhood over time*. For
8 example, we observed dialogues in Milwaukee before, in the midst of, and just after the uprising
9 surrounding the police killing of Sylville Smith. We heard conversations between Baltimore
10 residents before and after the gun trace task force corruption case (Baynes 2018). The Portals
11 project thus comprises different contexts, different people within those contexts, and different
12 moments and markers within those contexts. Readers should refer to the Appendix for further
13 details on each location, dates, and number of conversations that occurred in each site.
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31 *How it Works*

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33 The process is powerful in its simplicity. Each Portal is staffed by a member of the
34 community – a curator – who does outreach, holds events, and describes the study and is paid a
35 living wage. There were two critical features of the curators' work: 1) They were located within
36 a community-based group, with arts and justice mission, which often meant they had
37 longstanding connections in the communities; and 2) they used the Portals for many informal
38 “pop up” initiatives (showing movies to kids on the big screen, a space for art and performance
39 like poetry slams, running a barbershop, holding chess tournaments, having community “shared
40 meals” or town hall discussions with civic leaders, or dialoguing with global Portals that are not
41 a part of our study) on the days and times that conversations were not being recorded for our
42 study. In this way, the curators created the Portal to be a community gathering spot and
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3 interesting place for all kinds of discussions and collaborations in addition to discussions of
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5 policing. For just one instance, Portals founder Amar Bakshi says “we have people making a rap
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7 album in 15 countries, now being produced out of Milwaukee.”
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10 Participants enter the Portal typically after wandering in out of curiosity or word of
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12 mouth and engage in an approximately 20-minute conversation with someone else that they do
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14 not know (sometimes, there is more than one participant on each side) in a paired city. After
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16 participants hear about the study and give consent to participate but prior to beginning a
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18 conversation, they fill out a basic iPad survey consisting of 12 brief questions, including basic
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20 demographic background as well as queries about the frequency of interactions with police (age
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22 of first contact, how many times stopped in last five years), trust and confidence in police, and
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24 crime victimization. Crucially, as the individuals speak to one another, their conversation is not
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26 moderated by a researcher or even guided by traditional research questions posed in a survey.
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28 Instead, Portal participants are prompted with a single question: “There’s a lot in the media about
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30 how police interact with the communities in which they work. How do *you* feel about police in
31
32 your community?”⁴ Once participants enter the Portal container, they are usually alone, except
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34 for the person they are speaking to in the other city. Each of the Portal dialogues is video
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36 recorded, transcribed, then coded for analysis in Dedoose.
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45 *Participant Characteristics*

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47 Portals participants gave information about their demographic background, experiences
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49 with and trust in police, and victimization on a short iPad survey. The modal participant had a
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51 high school education or attended some college, was Black, male, and young (18-25). These
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53 characteristics varied somewhat by city (LA participants, for instance, were more likely to be
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3 Latinx and/or have obtained a higher level of education). Conversation transcripts reveal even
4 more variation; some participants across cities describe having middle class ties, having been
5 incarcerated or currently being justice-involved, and/or having law enforcement in their extended
6 families. Others speak to particular neighborhood conditions: many in Los Angeles describe
7 different policing regimes within their sprawling county, while participants in Baltimore describe
8 patterns of gentrification.
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17 As already noted our goal was to capture conversations among individuals who have
18 experienced high levels of police contact. And this is borne out by the data – 72 % reported that
19 they had been stopped by police (not counting minor traffic violations).⁵ Almost half of those in
20 Chicago, Baltimore, and Milwaukee reported that they had been stopped over 7 times (Figure
21 A1). And strikingly, for many of the Portals participants, contact was quite recent – in both
22 Milwaukee and Chicago at least 30 % of respondents said they had an involuntary encounter *in*
23 *the last week or month* (Figure A2). For additional information on participant characteristics,
24 please see the Appendix.
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40 **Our Approach to the Data**

41 We proceed from the idea that subjugated knowledge offers a vital accounting of the
42 American state and the democratic condition in our time (Cohen 2004, Foucault 1976; hooks
43 1992; Scott 1990). As we note above, understanding and theorizing government, state action,
44 and state power requires examining its operation in real communities as it actually exists. Thus,
45 we follow the constitutive and “active listening” approaches of scholars like Katherine Cramer
46 (2012), whose “listening investigations” uncovered a “rural consciousness.” Although Cramer’s
47 primary topic differs from ours – she visited local café klatches of working-class Whites in rural
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3 Wisconsin while we focused primarily upon dense urban neighborhoods of mostly Black and
4 brown people – we adopted a similar approach for a similar reason. We believe that listening
5 can yield unmatched insight into political understandings.⁶
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10 Existing large-N surveys are notoriously inadequate at capturing the experiences of
11 highly policed communities. (See Pettit 2012 for an excellent discussion of how modern social
12 and population surveys regularly disappear incarcerated people from their samples). Mario
13 Small (2008, p. 3) notes the advantages to scholars of locating interview subjects by “finding
14 them through non-random means, such as organizations” or, in our case, by placing a Portal in a
15 highly-policed area. In such cases, researchers usefully turn to non-probability, non-random
16 purposive samples.
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20 Like Cramer’s subjects, our Portals participants are not a strictly random sample, and
21 we cannot say how representative they are of communities of interest. We believe the Portals
22 exhibit the virtues of a more ethnographic or qualitative method. The method observes people in
23 their communities and in their own words – what Melissa Harris Perry refers to as “everyday
24 political talk” – while also demonstrating the powerful insights gained from scale and ecological
25 diversity (Harris-Lacewell 2004). We do not know who elects not to have a conversation after
26 learning about the Portal. We do not know what kind of response rate we are getting or whether
27 we are systematically undersampling introverts, those who are more reticent to discuss their
28 experiences with police, or people who are working during Portals operating hours.
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32 While we cannot systematically assess who we are missing from the communities (and it
33 is not only likely, but certain, that we missed many different kinds of neighborhoods), we believe
34 that not having a representative sampling design is an acceptable tradeoff given that we are after
35 richer data that reveals not just a snapshot of opinion that is “representative,” but how people
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3 reason together, how they frame things in their own words and not those of the survey
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5 researcher, and how they develop a theory of state action and power. Interpersonal interactions
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7 capture aspects of political life that traditional large-N, representative surveys do not (Sanders
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9 1999) – complexity, reasoning, disagreement, explanations for a given belief. Representativeness
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11 or bias would be critical if we were testing hypotheses about the distributions of attitudes (how
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13 many) or causal relationships between variables (how related), studies based on a “sampling
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15 logic.” Our study is more akin to a “case study logic”, “critical when asking *how* and *why*
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17 questions, with which a sampling logic has greater difficulty” (Small 2008, 6). That said, our
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19 focus on narrative will likely enhance and improve survey data collections and resulting studies
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21 that do focus on *how many* type questions. Other scholars can use the discursive themes we
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23 locate in Portals conversations to conduct their own larger representative surveys to specifically
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25 measure what specific proportion of the population thinks X or Y.
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31 In explaining her turn to intensive listening in local groups, Cramer (2016, p. 20) puts it
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33 this way: “I find mass-sample public opinion surveys enormously helpful for capturing what a
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35 large population of people think at a given point in time. But for the task of figuring out why
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37 people think what they do I have found no better substitute than listening to them in depth
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39 and hearing how they piece the world together for themselves.... Poll-based analyses of opinion
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41 ought to be accompanied not just by focus groups or in-depth interviews but also by listening
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43 methods that expose us to the conversations and contexts of everyday life.” We agree.
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47 Our approach is an interpretive exercise in hearing how ordinary people who regularly
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49 experience policing make sense of the world, how they describe the “rules of engagement” with
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51 the state, and how they perceive their communities’ power and position. Through this bottom-up
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53 approach, our hope is to identify a collective consciousness and its components: themes that
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3 animate or anchor the conversation, rhetorical strategies and metaphors, distinctions drawn,
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5 references to historical touchpoints, and variations by gender, race and ethnicity, or city. Once
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7 we identify common vocabularies, resonant frames (Woodly 2015), and ideological anchors we
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9 can begin to answer larger questions about oppositional frameworks, systems of thought, and
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11 political morality within race-class subjugated communities.
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15 So, instead of asking whether people think police are fair or whether they trust police all
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17 the time, sometimes, or never – what a survey might ask – instead we ask how do they “define
18
19 the limits of the permissible” of police and residents (Dawson 2001)? Instead of asking whether
20
21 having a police encounter *causes* a particular attitude or behavior – as those analyzing surveys
22
23 might do (and typically with some difficulty) – we listen for our respondents’ “causal story” of
24
25 state action in their communities. Instead of trying to measure the number of mentions of topics,
26
27 or distributions of anti-police attitudes, we seek to explore *how people reason through their*
28
29 *experiences*, the ways they frame and don’t frame problems pertaining to security from violence.
30
31 By doing all of this, we can locate the various strands of political discourse and beliefs structured
32
33 by personal and communal experience with the state.
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40 **ANALYSIS: Citizenship & the City**

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42 In this part we trace how Portals respondents’ conversations progress from a particular
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44 description of their own experiences or their understandings of how police operate in their
45
46 communities and neighborhoods. For many, their experiences are marked by their perception
47
48 that police are simultaneously selectively vigilant and negligent, what we term *distorted*
49
50 *responsiveness*. We then show how their conversations organically morph into a more general
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52 characterization of their relationship with the state. Through their persistent contact with the
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3 coercive arm of the state (its second face), participants ascribe a logic to the state's orientation to
4 them. In their minds, all community members are "up for the taking" —available for scapegoat,
5 sanction, or abandon by the state. Portals conversations illuminate how race-class subjugated
6 citizens characterize both the nature and logic of their citizenship based on their experiences with
7 police. The remainder of this paper will define distorted responsiveness and illustrate the ways
8 in which respondents' experiences with police relate to their more general understanding of the
9 state's orientation toward them.
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22 **Distorted Responsiveness**

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24 Across Portals conversations participants did not describe the police as performing a unified
25 mission aimed at ensuring their security but, rather, as acting simultaneously harmful and
26 unheeding. We characterize their understanding of the dual nature of police activity and its
27 relationship to the community as *distorted responsiveness*, though it was called many things by
28 participants. Despite unique experiences, different places of emphasis, and disagreement about
29 the motivations of police, we witness across Portals conversations, a consistent collective
30 understanding that aggressive and arbitrary patrolling was *yoked* together with invisibility of
31 police or their ambivalence in the face of immediate danger.
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42 Approximately 49% of conversations in this sample described distorted responsiveness
43 when referring to how the police authority was oriented in their communities. Indeed, distorted
44 responsiveness seems to have a broad resonance and expression across communities in our study,
45 across participants, and across conversational pairings, suggesting that this idea, is not a
46 particularistic one but a broadly accepted and frequently deployed framework for describing
47 policing in urban space. What is striking and gives us confidence that this concept is an
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3 important descriptive narrative of police activity is that we find distorted responsiveness even
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5 among participants who disagree about the cause of police violence and/or understand the role of
6
7 their communities differently. Distorted responsiveness was a prominent motif coursing through
8
9 conversations that bridged various divides, among participants who said “the police ain’t shit” at
10
11 one end to those that said “the police do the best they can.” One conversational pairing may
12
13 associate distorted responsiveness with an extended history of racial subjugation (“White people
14
15 know, they know what we capable of and they trying to do everything in they power to keep us
16
17 from doing it”). Another may express primary frustration with community violence, and the
18
19 police’s failure to prioritize it. The breadth and variation of distorted responsiveness emerge in
20
21 the analysis of our coding as well. According to our analysis, there is limited demographic
22
23 variation that correlates with distorted responsiveness within these conversational dyads. We
24
25 provide our systematic coding analysis in the Appendix.
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31 Typical Portals conversations describe the police as “doing too much,” “they be like
32
33 extra,” or they “sweat people about cigarettes.” These terse phrases were followed by extensive
34
35 elaborations on the disposition of police toward their communities and families. The police were
36
37 extremely attentive to small infractions and would hound people for minor quibbles. Police were
38
39 “petty.” Police would require that people show identification inquire as to where they were
40
41 going. And, when police stopped individuals for minor infractions and seemingly innocuous
42
43 inquiries, they were overly aggressive in their interactions. Notably, Portal participants
44
45 explained that this energy and attentiveness to their family and friends did not translate into
46
47 energetic response when people were at risk of violence or predation, or when they had already
48
49 endured violence. In these critical moments, participants said the police were absent or slow to
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51 respond, and when they did respond police further victimized them or treated them as criminal
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3 suspects. Though participants could easily recognize the duality of police action and describe its
4
5 pattern, they were also confused by the contradictions inherent in their experience. They
6
7 wondered aloud why police seemed to be there at a moment's notice to check them for
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9 insignificant, technically unlawful things, but withdrawn and reluctant to protect them when their
10
11 presence was desired. Participants described their communities as having a sense of being on a
12
13 tight leash sometimes but at other times a sense of the free fall of abandonment at those key
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15 moments in their lives and the lives of those around them when they desperately needed help.
16
17 Importantly, even those who had more positive views of police and who were sympathetic to the
18
19 dangers police faced demonstrated an understanding of distorted responsiveness as we describe it
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21 below.
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26 In this frame, police are both fast *and* slow, vigilant *and* reticent. It was common for
27
28 participants to describe the police as being like “Johnny on the spot” when they or a friend were
29
30 selling a loose cigarette but as nonresponsive or blasé when they really needed and tried to enlist
31
32 their help – “it’s gonna be like just callin’ a phone with nobody on the other end, you know.”
33
34 The juxtaposition of extreme police responses to things like a “10 year old walking across the
35
36 street” without using a crosswalk or “speed walking” while exhibiting shoulder shrug responses
37
38 to people being shot in the head was a common feature of conversations. For example, one
39
40 young Black woman in Chicago started to describe the police to her Portal partner: “Well, the
41
42 police in Chicago, I feel like they’re real picky, because you can call them for one thing and they
43
44 take forever to come but if they hear it’s another thing that they rush, and that’s not fair.”
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46 Another exchange between women analogizes the police as usurping a father’s role, to which her
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48 conversation partner elaborates that the fatherly support is distorted – quick to do harm for a
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50 stolen car but not big enough to secure us in the face of violence:
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6 *You can't even raise your children properly, you know, with someone else [the police]*
7 *trying to be their dad. I mean, you're not even a part of my family. How are you, how are*
8 *you providing for me? It's as if they're giving us family support.*

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14 *How are you even being supported? I can't even get you to come to my neighborhood if*
15 *somebody gets shot... But for our stolen car, you can. You can do 70 and 80 down a one-*
16 *way street and all these children playing on it.*

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24 Another person revealed succinctly how things work: "In my city, it's more of a they will put you
25 in jail for weed or something little but if somebody gets shot in the head down the street, they
26 can't find who did it. That's how it is here." A 21-year old Latino in Los Angeles observed: "I
27 grew up in, mostly like, minority groups area community, so I think policing was, like, really
28 heavy... And then unfortunately when you did call them for help or like attention, they weren't
29 really as productive when you did."

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37 Others described how police made arbitrary decisions, suddenly having the budget and
38 manpower to police picayune activity and to harass but not to protect: "the police where I live
39 at," one 31-year old Black woman in Milwaukee noted, "they just take a long time to get there.
40 Like, you can call them for anything. It don't matter what it is. And they be talking like, like they
41 don't got enough force out here to come and help you when you really need them. But they be
42 harassing people who ain't got nothing. Absolutely nothing. Yeah, they do shit when they ready
43 to do it. When it's beneficial to them. They really don't give a fuck about how you is."

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53 Collectively, participants described police spending a lot of time and energy on arresting people

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3 for selling loosies or drinking out of paper bags but when people need the police or there's a
4 chance for police to do something to help the community, they vanish.
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8 For others, memorable personal experiences formed the basis for their perceptions of
9 distorted responsiveness. Take one young Black woman in Milwaukee, who recalls a personal
10 experience being questioned coming home and police flashing their lights in her sleeping son's
11 face before questioning her about being out late: "I really don't like the police. Like, they don't
12 respond fast enough when you really need them. They rude as ever, they stop you for no
13 apparent reason at all. Like, they just.... I feel like they do too much... Your mission is to serve
14 and protect, but we see you as threats now. Me and my son, we scared to walk down the street.
15 We go home, we shut all the doors, let all the blinds down. We go to bed." She goes on to say
16 "They worn out they welcome. They're not even needed.... They're pointless." And after
17 admitting that her biggest fear is having her 2-year old son shot by police, she says "I want to be
18 able to take him to a park, or take him swimming and not be no police up there. Because now
19 they everywhere." Some had had personal experiences with violent victimization and police not
20 responding:
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37 *I happened to get a bullet in my spine, which is still there. I haven't heard*
38 *anything about anybody being caught or anything. There's cameras right there on*
39 *that corner and on the building. (Black Male in Milwaukee, 51 years old)*
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47 *They come but they don't never come on time. Like when I had got shot they ain't*
48 *really... they weren't too concerned. They came like, it took them like a hour to*
49 *come. I mean where I got shot at, it wasn't too serious, but it's still a fact that a*
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3 *person gets shot and y'all taking all day to come. (Unidentified Chicago*
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5 *participant)*
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10 *This fifteen year old girl just got shot in her kitchen and she dead. They couldn't*
11 *save her. So like you said they don't come fast. They give you time to die. They*
12 *give you time to die. You know it be like oh well they probably be deceased by the*
13 *time we get there. (Black Male in Milwaukee, 57 years old)*
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21 These personal experiences were followed by exasperation and confusion; policing logics
22 made very little sense to them and were contradictory and inconsistent. After describing calling
23 the police when his life was threatened and “they never even came,” his conversation partner
24 blurted out the question: “So who do we call to protect us? The people that’s here to protect us is
25 pumping fear in our hearts, so who do we call when we need...” Who was their guardian? That
26 question hung heavy on the conversations. After noting that police “show a lack of regard for
27 the community, but then again we’re supposed to look up to them,” one man admitted being
28 confused “I don’t know what they want us to do, or how they want us to feel.” For some
29 respondents, the experience of distorted responsiveness lead to the conclusion that police
30 protection was a hoax. Several mocked a common motto of police – “Protect and Serve.”
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44 This conversation between a man in Los Angeles and a man in Baltimore describes a
45 game to measure how nonresponsive police were to gun violence, and their resulting
46 interpretation that some areas get more responsiveness than others. Notably, these Portals
47 participants disagreed about virtually every other topic that arose – particularly the Rodney King
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3 shooting – but shared a common description for why police did not respond to gunshots and the
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6 perverse reality that the highest crime areas had the least protection.

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8 Los Angeles man: ... *in the early 1990s, I lived in Venice and Crenshaw, which*
9
10 *was not a good area back then. I used to listen to, to gun fire at night, with my*
11 *friend.... We used to sit out on the balcony trying to figure out whether it was a 9*
12 *millimeter, a 38, an AK-47..... And we used to time them, time they're roll out,*
13 *and how long it took, took to, to get to the, the crime, to the gunshots, and it was*
14 *average 15 minutes to half an hour.... And that just does not make sense, you*
15 *know what I mean? You got a police station which is, is several blocks away from*
16 *gunshots, occurring all the time...*

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28 Baltimore man: *Because they're not, they don't care about Watts and Crenshaw.*
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31 *They worry about Downtown.*

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35 Los Angeles man: *Right, where the money is.*

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38 [A lengthy discussion on why there are no cameras in those areas but there are in
39
40 downtown ensues.]

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45 Baltimore man: *But they don't care! But, but, if there's a community that is*
46 *predominantly European with trickles of Black in it, working class, they do have*
47 *those cameras.*

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54 Los Angeles man: Yeah.

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5 Baltimore man: *They, they do. Protecting them.....You ask me, "Well, why do you*
6 *want to move out?" Because I don't have any protection! I want my kids to go*
7 *and play also. I don't want to abandon my area.*

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15 Los Angeles man: *You want your kids to go to a good school, to be able to go to a*
16 *park unmolested, to have real estate prices go up.*

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21 Baltimore man: Yes.

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26 Baltimore man: *To have the American Dream. And you cannot have that with*
27 *drug dealers on the streets, prostitutes, murder, gunfire at night, um, that's just*
28 *my point of view.*

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35 In some ways, the discourse we've observed thus far reflects longstanding ideas detailing
36 the ways in which Black Americans have suffered unequal protection of the criminal law while
37 being subject to unequal enforcement of it. Historically, both Randall Kennedy (1998) and
38 William Stuntz (2011) document state failure to protect enslaved people from murder and
39 assault, often by Whites, during the antebellum period. In particular, they cite the failure of the
40 U.S. Supreme Court during Reconstruction to interpret the Constitution to allow the federal
41 government to intervene against states whose governments were overcome by privately run
42 terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan that led massacres of newly empowered African
43 American officials and constituencies in the South. Focusing their attention primarily on
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3 analyses of the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, both authors extend their
4
5 analysis of the state's failure across all components of the criminal justice apparatus to take
6
7 seriously victimization of Blacks well into the 20th century. In addition to analysis of
8
9 constitutional law, the literature reveals a concern with and accounting of the ways in which
10
11 municipal government and criminal justice system actors seemingly ignored or paid differential
12
13 attention to Black victims of crime as the U.S. crime rate began to soar between the late 1960's
14
15 and through the 1990's (Hacker 1995, Kennedy 1993, Sampson and Wilson 1995, Carter 1987).
16
17
18 The federal (and state) War on Drugs was a particular site for arguments about the
19
20 underenforcement of criminal law in response to violence related to illegal drug selling in cities
21
22 (Forman 2017, Fortner 2015, Tonry 1995).
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26
27 With respect to unequal and punitive enforcement of Black Americans, the literature is
28
29 very extensive, ranging again from the Antebellum period (e.g. Kennedy 1998; Oshinsky 1996;
30
31 Stroud 1827) through the Jim Crow period and the tumultuous struggle for Blacks for civil rights
32
33 during the 1960's (e.g. Berrey 2015, Chafe Gavins, and Korsted, eds. 2001, Baldwin 1966;
34
35 Muhammad 2010, Walker 2000). The research explores the existence of harsher criminal
36
37 penalties for Blacks as compared to Whites in criminal statutes for the same conduct; documents
38
39 empirically the fact that Blacks received longer prison sentences than Whites for similar conduct;
40
41 shows that once incarcerated, Blacks often were subject to much harsher prison conditions than
42
43 Whites; and demonstrates that policing on the streets was much harsher for Black people than for
44
45 Whites. Collectively, these accounts sometimes are referred to as "unequal protection and
46
47 unequal enforcement" to describe how the state, or law enforcement agencies collectively, failed
48
49 to protect Black Americans from criminal victimization while also subjecting them to harsh
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51 punishment. The discourse of distorted responsiveness our respondents describe is clearly
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3 related to the older characterization of the over and under protection of the criminal legal system
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5 in the literature, but it has emerged in a new policy landscape, an observation that is critical to
6
7 our argument here. A new form of policing has emerged over the last 30 years in response to a
8
9 national concern about rising crime rates and shaped by the politics of race (Weaver 2007).
10
11

12 Policing today is purportedly justified as a project of crime reduction. Indeed, crime
13
14 reduction is often touted as the primary reason for police, but this orientation is relatively new.
15
16 Well into the 1980's, neither scholars nor police executives considered crime reduction through
17
18 policing to be of paramount importance or even possible (e.g., Bayley 1994, Manning 1977).
19
20 Today, however, it is commonplace for both policing agencies and the public they serve to argue
21
22 that bringing crime rates down is a critical function of the police role. This change is due to a
23
24 confluence of at least four factors, resulting in an explosion in the size of the state's second
25
26 coercive, surveillant face. First, the rise of the idea of accountable bureaucracies has provided the
27
28 demand for policing agencies to attempt to demonstrate a connection between their activity and a
29
30 goal the public deems important – crime reduction – as opposed to simply detailing quantity of
31
32 action they perform as was done in the past (Moe 1984; Wilson 1989). Second, advances in
33
34 statistics since the 1990's now allow social scientists to demonstrate a relationship between
35
36 police on the street and changes in crime without being hampered by endogeneity problems (Di
37
38 Tella & Schargrotsky 2014; Braga & Weisburd 2010; Klick and Tabarrock 2005), so police
39
40 executives can and do seek to legitimize their crime control strategies through empirical accounts
41
42 of the relationship between police manpower and drops in crime. Third, a policy mechanism,
43
44 “Broken Windows” policing, that promotes the use of proactive police engagement with
45
46 individuals on the basis of low-level offenses for the purpose of preventing more serious crime
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48 became popular among police executives suddenly held accountable by their bosses – mayors –
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3 for crime reduction (Bellin 2014). Broken windows policing, together with a data-driven
4
5 management mechanism called COMPSTAT, has driven proactive policing (Fagan, Braga,
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7 Brunson, Pattavina 2016; Meares 2015). Fourth, police agencies received a massive influx of
8
9 federal resources beginning in the 1970s that have vastly expanded the size of police forces and
10
11 the manpower of many departments (Hinton 2016; Weaver 2007), which allowed them to devote
12
13 more resources to the “cops of dots” approach COMPSTAT management techniques promote.
14
15 Proactive policing also has been bolstered by the proliferation of low-level criminal laws enacted
16
17 by state and local legislative bodies, which both authorize and invited invite police to make
18
19 contact with Americans for virtually any or no reason at all. Michael Brown of Ferguson was
20
21 violating a “manner of walking” law, a law making a crime out of gait.
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26 Portals conversations reflect the contemporary reality of policing we describe above,
27
28 which promotes crime reduction through strategies aimed at policing low-level offenses (Braga
29
30 et al 2015). Our respondents describe these newer practices in the form of hyper attentiveness to
31
32 small offenses. At the same time, the participants discuss the failure of police to come when
33
34 they are really needed because, at least in their understanding, they are obsessed with petty
35
36 jaywalking.
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40 Constitutional law might have provided a backstop to the rise and subsequent
41
42 consequences of this shift in policing towards high volume stops and order-maintenance
43
44 policing, but the courts through their interpretations of the Fourth Amendment have instead
45
46 provided lax oversight police on the street (Maclin 1998, Maclin 2011, Harris 1993). Indeed,
47
48 constitutional law itself reflects a dynamic of distorted responsiveness. While case after case
49
50 provide few limits to police finding reasonable suspicion on the basis of an officer’s belief about
51
52 the likelihood of an individual’s involvement in criminal activity when that person is Black and
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3 present in a “high crime area,” courts have also refused to mandate that the state act to protect
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5 people in serious jeopardy who have called on the state to help them. The United State Supreme
6
7 Court famously ruled in *DeShaney v Winnebago County* (1989) that the Due Process Clause of
8
9 the Fourteenth Amendment does not mandate as a substantive matter an affirmative duty of the
10
11 state to protect its citizens from private violence. In *DeShaney*, the Winnebago County’s Child
12
13 Protective Services was aware that four-year old Joshua’s father regularly beat him, so when
14
15 Joshua ultimately was beaten so severely he suffered massive brain damage and was
16
17 institutionalized, his family sued claiming the state had a duty to protect him and intervene. The
18
19 Supreme Court disagreed, and this decision was reiterated five years later in *Town of Castle Rock*
20
21 *v. Gonzales* when the Court found no Due Process violation and therefore no suit under Section
22
23 1983 for a woman who sought to sue the state for the failure of police to enforce a temporary
24
25 restraining order against her husband who violated the TRO, kidnapped her children and
26
27 ultimately killed them.
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33 Like Joshua DeShaney, Portals respondents discussed situations in which they were
34
35 ignored in seeking police protection. The juxtaposition of suffocating police attention to paltry
36
37 offenses stood in stark contrast to respondents’ accounts of deafening silence in situations of
38
39 serious need. Not being heard, not being cared for when you are a victim, not being taken
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41 seriously is a form of nonresponsiveness and disregard. It is painful in its own right. But being
42
43 treated harshly *in conjunction with perceived abandonment* is what we mean by distorted
44
45 responsiveness. What does it mean to not be heard but to be crushed on a lark? To not be
46
47 defended one day but targeted the next? Watched over and sanctioned for slights while their real
48
49 wound went unresolved? Does it give rise to a certain kind of citizenship in race-class
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51 subjugated communities? In the next section, we begin to engage these questions by
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3 demonstrating how distorted responsiveness does not stop with the police; rather, it is foundation
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5 to how race-class subjugated communities characterize their relationship to state authority more
6
7 generally. We suggest that this bottom-up theorization of democratic responsiveness runs counter
8
9 to the dichotomous framework most commonly engaged in the literature—that either the state
10
11 registers your preferences and gives you resources, or it does not.
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17 **“It ain't just the police, it's the entire system”:** The Police as an Analogy for State

18 **Treatment**

19
20 In this section, we show how Portals participants link their experience with police and their
21
22 understandings of the basis of police action to a more general understanding of the state's
23
24 orientation to them and their communities. To participants, their experience with policing
25
26 provides an allegory for their expectations with respect to the state's response to their needs
27
28 more generally. The state usually won't register their pleas; it will instead prescribe surveillance.
29
30 The state is usually absent; but when it's present, it's aggressive and presumes culpability. Racial
31
32 power foregrounds respondents' understanding of state treatment. Many respondents speculate
33
34 that White and/or monied communities do not experience this dynamic – in particular when
35
36 residents of those communities experience the same problems our respondents discussed. It was
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38 their sense that the state responded to other communities in a more effective and benevolent
39
40 fashion.
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47 Thus far we've highlighted only conversation excerpts, and while revelatory and
48
49 exemplary of our thesis, they do not fully capture how dialogue organically flows (without
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51 prompting) from how people describe the nature of policing to how they describe their
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53 understanding of the logic of those experiences, to a more general understanding of the state's
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3 orientation to them. To illustrate, we have selected one conversation in its entirety to model the
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5 process by which state theorizations emerge in conversation.⁷
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8 This is a conversation between an 18-year-old Black young man from Milwaukee in his
9
10 last year of high school who aspires to attend the military and a 55-year-old Black mother from
11
12 Baltimore who fears for the fate of her 15-year-old son. The Milwaukee participant reports
13
14 having been stopped by police more than seven times. He describes how he hates the police
15
16 because they'll stop you "just like that" if your skin is of a darker hue. The Baltimore woman
17
18 believes it is only a matter of time before her son has a negative encounter with the BPD. She
19
20 worries that the police will "pull him up"—a striking phrase that seems to imply the myriad ways
21
22 the criminal justice system will whisk his life into a tragic direction. She then begins to describe
23
24 her own experience with police treatment as one of distorted responsiveness, illustrated by a
25
26 historic shift in practices and characterized by excessive vigilance and unprotection. Though she
27
28 engaged in unlawful drugs in her youth, she admits, she received limited attention from the
29
30 police back then. She then notes a change in way police began to treat her as she entered her late
31
32 30s, where says she began getting pulled over with alarming frequency for no reason. She argues
33
34 that Martin O'Malley (former governor of Maryland from 2007 to 2015) engaged in a policy of
35
36 "arresting Black people just because they were Black." And then she alludes to a flagrant
37
38 instance of unprotection amidst rabid police intervention in the community in describing how the
39
40 Baltimore police raped a woman who called for help.
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49 Milwaukee man: *I said, I hate the police because I think it's wrong that they treat us like*
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51 *this because of the color of our skin. Like, you can get pulled over just like that because*
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53 *you walking around at night and you our skin color.*
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5 Baltimore woman: *I mean, that's here, I think that's everywhere. But my thing about it, if*
6 *they not doing anything- if no one doing anything wrong, why do they pull you up? That's*
7 *what I don't get and that's what I don't like. Now, my son, he look like he's your age but*
8 *he's only 15 and I know it's just a matter of time before the police pull him up and I'm so*
9 *afraid that he's going to get killed by mistake, you see what I'm saying? Cause they*
10 *just...they shoot first and then ask questions later here.*

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21 Milwaukee man: *Right.*

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26 Baltimore woman: *I'll put it this way: when I was your age, no problem with the police- I*
27 *was smoking weed, doing everything that was against the law- when I got like 30, after I*
28 *had kids- I had seven kids by the time I was in my early 20's- I been pulled over by the*
29 *police, never had a record. By the time I hit 38- I think around 38- we had a certain*
30 *governor...I don't know if he was a senator, his name was O'Malley, he was actually just*
31 *arresting Black people just because they were Black. Some of the police, they had to meet*
32 *a quota. So, for the first time in my life, when I turned 38, they all had [inaudible]*
33 *because of that. I didn't have a record but I got arrested like...on a weekly basis, I was*
34 *getting arrested. One police pulled me over for, um, prostitution. I was like, are you*
35 *serious? And then when they found out I didn't have a record, then they gave me some*
36 *other bogus bullshit charge, a drug charge or something. So, I...I can relate to where*
37 *you're coming from as a Black male but as a Black female, they say, um, one police here*
38 *raped a girl in her home because she wanted help. Did you hear about that?*
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5 Milwaukee man: *Yeah, uh, I heard about, like, when I was on Facebook...*

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8 *I think I heard something something like that cause when I clicked on it, it said something*
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10 *similar to that.*

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15 Baltimore woman: *Yeah. She, um, it was on the news, I think on Facebook too. Well, she*
16 *was from here and she asked- you know, her daughter was missing. Cause her daughter*
17 *was missing, she called the police, White guy came and raped her. I mean, he tried to*
18 *rape her and he called for help, that's the last thing you expect police to do.*

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26 Milwaukee man: *Right.*

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31 Baltimore woman: *Especially if you need they help.*

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35 The Milwaukee participant then proposes a broader theory of the state. It is here that
36
37 police become a rhetorical stand-in for White authority. Black people are policed this way
38
39 “because they scared of us”, he says, and then makes the rhetorical switch: “White people
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41 know... they know what we capable of and they trying to do everything in they power to keep us
42
43 from doing it.” The Baltimore participant concurs by situating the treatment of Black lives in the
44
45 context of history: White fear of difference is embedded in the nation’s fabric. She continues that
46
47 Black people receive this treatment so “they can and try to make themselves look right about
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49 things” despite knowing that Black people are “the most loving people there are.” At this point,
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51 whether participants are referring to police or White racial power becomes indistinguishable.
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5 Milwaukee man: *But I think...I think it's just, I think it's just that, a: I think, with the*
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8 *police, I think they pull us over because they scared of us.*
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12 Baltimore woman: *They do. The one..*
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17 Milwaukee man: *Not psychically, I'm talking about mentally. Like, cause I know, I know*
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19 *that White people know...at least know all them, they know what we capable of and they*
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21 *trying to do everything in they power to keep us from doing it.*
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26 Baltimore woman: *Right, I agree with you.. if you look at history since the United States*
27
28 *became independent, White people always been scared of anything different; not just*
29
30 *Black people but anything different from them. So, it's not like we're the only ones that-*
31
32 *the Indians was like that. They [inaudible] like that. But as Black people, we're the only*
33
34 *ones lasting, still out in this country. So, I feel as though they just really trying to bring us*
35
36 *down as far as they can and try to make themselves look right about things.*
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42 Milwaukee man: *Right.*
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47 Baltimore woman: *Because, naturally, we are the most loving people there are. That's...*
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51 Milwaukee man: *We populate- we got the most population on Earth.*
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3 *Baltimore woman: Right, that's where- that's where life began, with us.*
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8 *Milwaukee man: Right.*
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12 Following their critique of state authority, they return again to police and briefly consider
13 whether police treatment of Black people can be halted. The conversation concludes on a
14 hopeless note. In the absence of “a very powerful voice” which has yet to come, they’re bereft of
15 solutions. The Baltimore woman concludes with some pragmatic and maternal advice to her
16 partner: “All I can do is ask you as a Black man, just stay out of trouble, keep going to school,
17 and do what you do- everything right and they can't touch you.”
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28 *Baltimore woman: But...bad police need to stop. You have any ideas that might help them*
29 *stop, any ideas that you can give them?*
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35 *Milwaukee man: Huh?*
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40 *Milwaukee Curator: Can you think of anything that could stop it?*
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45 *Baltimore woman: That might help the police stop doing what they doing.*
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49 *Milwaukee man: I think it's going to take a very powerful voice to do that, but until then,*
50 *no.*
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54 *Baltimore woman: Ain't nobody done did it.*
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5 Milwaukee man: *I know.*
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10 Baltimore woman: *All I can do is ask you as a Black man, just stay out of trouble, keep*
11 *going to school, and do what you do- everything right and they can't touch you.*
12
13 *[inaudible], my brother.*
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19 This conversation demonstrates a process by which respondents move from particular
20 experiences with state actors (such as police) to an understanding of those experiences in terms
21 of the logic of government action and how that in turn shapes one's civic agency. First,
22 participants agree that police treatment is distorted; that despite the plethoric presence of police
23 in their lives, they fail to protect. From here, their conversation models how for highly policed
24 communities, police are proxies for state logics. They believe that White fear of Black excellence
25 and morality motivates police conduct. It is in this moment that they begin to conflate police
26 with White political authority, first with the governor, and later, to the Founding Fathers. To
27 them the logic is simple: the state continues to render Black life expendable in order to protect
28 White righteousness and power. The conversation concludes with dejection, where neither
29 participant can imagine a solution. Their conclusion is unsurprising given their framework. The
30 framework specifies that government responses are filtered through a White authority structure,
31 so when political preferences are registered by government, they will be attended to only in a
32 way that affirms that structure.
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51 Despite the features that make this dialogue unique—its intergenerational and cross-
52 gender dynamic and the personal stories articulated—its pattern is similar to many others that
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3 took place in the Portal. Across conversations, police are an entry point for discussions of state
4 treatment more generally. Even participants that made no mention of distorted responsiveness
5
6 policing but lived in or around highly policed communities saw police as formative for their
7
8 sense of civic standing. For example, one prevalent theme in the dialogues was respondents'
9
10 assertion that they were "up for the taking" by police. This idea came out in various ways, but
11
12 nouns like revenue, profit, tax-collectors or verbs like seizing and profiting often animated the
13
14 conversations. Respondents spoke of being "fleeced," and they wondered aloud why their
15
16 communities had to pay for being disrespected. Their neighborhoods and families were used to
17
18 "collect a dime for the city and the government", and they were "nothing but a check":

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24 *You Black man and you young, they don't care about you... ya dig? They want to*
25
26 *keep you behind the walls so they can get paid. See they get paid from you good*
27
28 *money, man, you know good money. That's how they sending they kids to college*
29
30 *and all that stuff man. Buying houses and Mercedes Benz, you know. See, we can't*
31
32 *have that, they don't want us to have it, so they kill us, they kill up all our Blacks.*

33
34
35 [53 yr old Black man, Chicago]

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40 *It's funny because the police, we're nothing but a check to them. When we do stuff*
41
42 *bad, we get sent to jail and they get a paycheck while we just sit in there. None of*
43
44 *that money is going to us, they just a paycheck for it. [19 yr old Black man,*

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47 Milwaukee]

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3 *peace is not attractive to them, because it does not make them any money. They*
4 *do not make money off peace, they make money off chaos. [19 yr old Black man,*
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8 Milwaukee]

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12 *We're being locked up and held at a ransom. I call that a ransom, not a bail because this*
13 *is a system that's created for the rich to get richer, you understand what I'm saying?*
14
15 *We're not the rich.... I feel as though that system is created, why? To generate more*
16 *money for, for commissaries, for my family to spend more money on commissary food*
17 *and other families for other inmates who are in there... I have a four-year-old son. I don't*
18 *wish to spend my money on commissaries. I don't wish [to pay] lawyer's fees, and court*
19 *fees, and pawns, and things like that. No, I want to give this money to my son. [19 yr old*
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28 Black man, Newark]

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31 Police had broad warrants to approach them, demand from them, humiliate them, fleece
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33 them, or assault them. In their formulations, displacement, bodily harm, financial seizure, and
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35 arbitrary stops were easily accomplished precisely because their value to the city or before
36
37 society was not recognized, so that police were perceived as having incredible power on one side
38
39 of the duality – “the police is always gonna be able to do what they wanna do.” Or, as another
40
41 person put it: “[Police are] a legalized gang on their own. They can do whatever they want to.
42
43 Get you out the way if they want to and then nobody will never find out.” Respondents projected
44
45 understandings that they were not in a position—by their residence in the “pure ghetto,” or
46
47 because of not “knowing any White people,” or because they “looked like a thug” – to contest
48
49 police action. In theoretical terms, police could elide the written rules that would ordinarily
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51 constrain their actions, the “overt curriculum” (Justice and Meares 2014), because they were
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3 dealing with members of a group that was not seen as having clout or significance. As one
4 person remarked “You know, Black already means nothing to America at the end of the day....”
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8 A second and closely related theme in the conversations is a widespread consensus that
9
10 the state selectively responds, using race, place, and wealth as a discretionary lens. One of the
11 Chicago participants in a distinction regularly drawn between the North and South Sides said:
12
13 “y'all understand the issues that we deal with when it comes to the South Side; ain't nobody
14 pulling anybody over the same way they are on the North Side where all the White folks are.
15
16 And I said to them [the police who stopped him], we're the ones that don't have the liquid and the
17 capital to be able to pay for all of this, so that don't even make sense to me.” Respondents also
18
19 spoke of their sense that White kids received public health resources for addiction to opioids
20 while their children were imprisoned for possessing or selling crack cocaine. In Baltimore, for
21
22 example, heroin addiction has been serious problem for the city since at least the 1970's, and
23
24 participants described with disgust how assistance, treatment, and basic concern were withheld
25
26 from Black communities. The crisis was addressed by sending Black people in Baltimore to
27
28 prisons. A Baltimore resident describes his understanding of the state's response:
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37 *But now it moved out to the White community.... If your child is an addict, it will*
38 *be no harm, go to the nearest fire department, and they will help you. Excuse me,*
39 *fifteen years ago, you didn't say nothing about that....in Maryland, they have*
40 *Prince George's County, one of the richest, PG County, Potomac, Bethesda,*
41 *Annapolis, now it's out there, and it's, "Oh my God! My kids are opium, they do,*
42 *they've been stealing my stuff from the cabinet!" Um, oh, oh. "I'm one too! I been*
43 *taking it also! Now I'm addicted!" Well, who's going to help you? Da-na-na!*
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54 *We're going to help you. The government's going to give you money for it.*
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3 *Well, 15 years ago, in the Black community, we came to you for money. You said,*
4 *"It's a epidemic. Um, we'll see what we can do." Long as it's here, it's okay, but*
5 *when it get out there to your children, oh no! To your schools? Oh no! And how*
6 *did it get there? Those same kids came into the city. No, we go out there, we get*
7 *arrested. You know that. We out of place. They come to the city, they got carte*
8 *blanche. everything gets taken care of it when it hits the money community.*
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19 As we've seen, when mapping citizenship in the city based on how citizens narrate their
20 experiences and views of the state, we can no longer view democratic governance along a
21 singular dimension – whether it is responsive or unresponsive. It is true that our respondents
22 point to ways in which the state does not regularly respond to their needs with policies that
23 coincide with their preferences, but to describe this state of affairs simply as a *lack* of
24 responsiveness when the state is actively responsive and even violent in their lives while
25 simultaneously absent in situations of great need holds up an image of government that bears no
26 resemblance to their lived reality. If we want to understand governance, power, civic standing,
27 and freedom in the city, we need to conceive of government differently, and this scholarly
28 enterprise should include government treatment, not just government responsiveness to mass
29 preferences.
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47 **Conclusion**

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49 Portals dialogues allow us to see a story that many thought was obvious in a new way.
50 Through Portals, strangers engaged in real conversations with each other about an institution that
51 for many Americans, and certainly for Portals respondents, is a central representative of the state
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3 (Forman 2017). While scholars have usefully connected accounts of negative experiences of
4 police to pervasive distrust of this institution (e.g. Monica Bell 2016), few have discussed how
5 police experiences are formative of citizenship (Miller and Stuart 2017, Lerman and Weaver
6 2014). We demonstrate that many experiences of race-class subjugated people with police are
7 marked by what we call distorted responsiveness in which police are pervasively and menacingly
8 active with respect to activities and contexts that do not to our respondents appear to redound to
9 their safety at all and yet absent and unheeding in the kinds of situations anyone would think
10 police would be available to “protect and serve.” We then show how ordinary citizens of the city
11 theorize more generally in their own words and on their own terms about how the state views
12 them and thus their own citizenship based on their interactions with the state’s second face. Our
13 paper provides, we believe, a more realistic picture of political authority and lived citizenship in
14 the city by including the experiences of people in race-class subjugated communities.

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31 What we attend to less in this paper is the extent to which Portals participants’ theories of
32 the state incite particular political responses. How, for instance, do participants seek to build
33 power in the face of police interventions characterized by distorted responsiveness? In a related
34 project that uses Portals dialogues, we find that persistent interaction with the second face of
35 state leads individuals to retreat from public life (“Right now, what I’m doing out here in the
36 streets of Chicago, little bro, is staying to myself...doing what I gotta do to survive in these
37 streets as a Black man.”), repudiate the state (“stop believing in their paperwork”), and aspire for
38 what we term *collective autonomy* (“time for us to just come together as a united group”).

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49 Accounting for how the second face of the state affects expressions of civic agency further
50 complicates the conception of the responsive/unresponsive state. When surveillance is the only
51 form of state responsiveness one’s community receives, it should be no surprise that one would
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3 cease to engage their government, that they'd aspire for alternatives that garnered them the
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5 dignity the state seems to systematically deny.
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8 By ignoring experiences citizens have with local bureaucrats and state actors like police
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10 in scholarship both creates and reinforces a lopsided methodological approach and in turn,
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12 substantive understanding of American government. The standard account envisions a world in
13
14 which everyone wants more and tighter connections to government, so scholars focus on ways to
15
16 bring government more fully into the lives of citizens and citizens voices more fully into the
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18 halls of power. But attention to the "second face" of government reveals that concern about
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20 equal distance of citizens from government does not capture the *quality* of treatment a citizen
21
22 receives from the state even in the imagined context of equal policy response. If the
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24 government's purported response to citizens' concern about crime, for example, results in
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26 constant coercive regulatory discipline from state actors that its recipients cannot translate as
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28 delivering any reasonable conception of public safety, then what does it mean to say that
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30 government is responsive?
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End Notes

¹ Portals were the creation of artist and entrepreneur Amar Bakshi and his organization, Shared Studios (Murphy 2014). Since 2014, he has used Portals to enable 25,000 conversations among nearly 9,000 participants, in more than 15 countries, including in Berlin, Germany; Herat, Afghanistan; Havana, Cuba; Seoul, South Korea; Detroit, New York City, and several others. We partnered with Bakshi to locate Portals in several neighborhoods in U.S. cities to initiate dialogues about policing.

² We do not discuss our Portal installation in Mexico City in this paper.

³ The sites were selected largely because of convenience and connections – the existence of community partners who would help run the Portal and share space. We often partnered with local nonprofit organizations that have an artistic and justice-oriented mission; they typically provide the Portal a physical space in a central location with high foot-traffic as well as an enduring connection to the community. They were deeply involved in the programming beyond our criminal justice dialogues.

⁴ At times, however, the process was messier in practice. Curators may take liberty with their framing of the question in order to make prospective participants feel comfortable with proceeding with the dialogue. They may also stay in the shipping container at the request of a participant. Participants may invite their peers in for support or safety. Some conversations may go longer than 20 minutes. We accept these tradeoffs, recognizing that as community members

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4 themselves, curators will have a better pulse than researchers on conditions amenable to what is
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6 often such sensitive dialogue.
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9 ⁵ In 2007, the Bureau of Justice Statistics reported that about 16% of Americans 16 or older had
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11 a face to face contact with a police officer in 2005, down from 21% in 2002. Forty-one percent
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13 of these stops involved drivers in traffic stops. (Durose 2010)
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16 ⁶ Unlike Cramer, and most political ethnographies to date, we purposefully don't insert ourselves
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18 into the conversations at all. Cramer participated in pre-existing forums for discussion with
19
20 community members with well-established relationships. In contrast, Portals is designed to
21
22 convene strangers. The Portal experience is designed to facilitate intimacy and connection in a
23
24 short amount of time, providing another reason not to reveal our roles as researchers, which
25
26 introduce both a professional and power dynamic that would turn an intimate real conversation
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28 into an interview.
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32 ⁷ Conversation introductions and departing words are omitted for the purposes of length.
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For Peer Review