The Policing of Socioeconomic Status:

How Changes Associated with Neoliberalism Contribute to Social Inequality
Neoliberalism and Policing

The historically recent embrace of neoliberalism as a political ideology, which promotes the increased role of privatization, deregulation and free markets, has led to widespread changes in social and economic conditions. Industrialized capitalist societies in North America and Western Europe are currently experiencing extensive ‘neoliberal restructuring’ in governance (Gordon, 2005). Perhaps no institution has felt the extent of the change brought on by the adoption of neoliberal principles as strongly as policing. The institution of policing is no longer a monopolized public force exerting top-down power. Policing today has become diversified, privatized and lateralized. The institutional shifts in policing have led to significant changes in the social experiences of the public. What are the real-life implications of the incorporation of neoliberalism into policing? This paper will seek to explore whether or not the recent neoliberal trends in policing systematically increase the advantage experienced by individuals with high socioeconomic status while simultaneously exacerbating the disadvantage experienced by those with low socioeconomic status. It is widely understood that socioeconomic status has important implications for an individual’s overall well-being. Socioeconomic status (SES) is strongly associated with mental and physical health, such that those with higher SES tend to experience better health outcomes on a variety of measures (Oakes & Rossi, 2003). This paper will argue that, across several different types of changes to policing as an institution, recent trends in policing contribute to the widening socioeconomic disparities between social classes. This paper will demonstrate how the privatization of policing, the diversification of policing initiatives, the policing of communal space, the risk-based nature of policing, the use of legitimized violence, the responsibilization of citizens, the utilization of policing as a form of criminal punishment and
the conceptualization of police services as a corporation cumulatively contribute to societal-wide disparities in social and economic resources, furthering inequality.

The Privatization of Policing

An important shift that has arisen out of the neoliberal agenda is the increased privatization and commodification of policing and security services. While policing used to be regulated by the state in its entirety, there has been a recent rise in private or non-state security companies offering a wide range of specialized services. The variation of private security firms has fundamentally restructured policing as an institution (Stenning & Clifford, 1981). This broadening array of policing and security agencies serves the wealthy well but the expensive services associated with these companies remain largely out-of-reach for those with low socioeconomic status. In comparison to public police services, private security is not held accountable to an organized regulatory body and tends to serve the market-driven interests of the corporation that employs them. For this reason, private security firms and the people who work for them inherently lack interest in the public good and the needs of the socioeconomically disadvantaged. For this reason, Canada’s ‘Lucky Moose Law’, which enables citizen pursuit and arrest of criminals off of private property, has become highly controversial. Opponents of this law question the implications of allowing private security to engage in police-like pursuit given that they are not legally obligated to act in accordance with the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Aside from the positive economic outcomes that have arisen from increased market competition, privatized policing has largely exerted a negative impact on the socioeconomically disadvantaged. Private security poses a significant threat to both justice and individual liberty, especially amongst society’s poor (Stenning & Clifford, 1981). Since they are commanded by
the wealthy and act as policing agents on the socially disadvantaged. Private security companies exaggerate the disparities that already exist between the capitalist elite and the rest of society.

**The Diversification of Policing Initiatives**

A significant change that has accompanied neoliberal policing has been the intense diversification of policing agencies. Across the entire network of private, hybrid, and public forms of police, new types of policing agencies have developed in order to provide specific services and satisfy the demand for a wide range of specialized security needs in the market. This expansion has broadened both the conceptualization of what policing is and the areas of social and economic life that can be policed. Insurance companies are a unique, and often privately run, form of policing in the neoliberal society that police along economic lines. The private insurance industry has displayed a tendency towards the division of society’s citizens into categories of differential ‘risk’ (Ericson et al., 1999). Insurance agencies withhold resources from the socially disadvantaged and support those who are economically secure. Policing in the insurance industry assumes personal responsibility among the socially disadvantaged for their circumstances and understands inequality as a necessary by-product of capitalist free-market competition (Ericson et al., 1999). The free-market principles that are inherent to neoliberalism as an ideology ignore the social origins of inequality. It conceptualizes society as a meritocracy so that blaming the disadvantaged for their lack of resources can be legitimized and structural equality initiatives can be avoided.

**The Policing of Communal Space**

Private security guards and various other types of hybrid policing agents, such as special constables, increasingly patrol property that is open to the public. The selective policing of these
communal spaces, by both private security guards and police officers, tends to single-out and exclude individuals with low status who are deemed ‘out-of-place’. Neoliberalism and the embedded nature of this selective policing represent a powerful barrier which prevents disadvantaged groups from accessing certain geographic spaces (Shoveller et al., 2008). This ‘proactive’ form of spatial policing targets specific individuals and leads to the systematic exclusion of the poor from places of significant and valued social experience. This side effect of communal policing limits the ability of the socially disadvantaged to obtain valuable cultural knowledge that is exchanged through conversation in these communal spaces. In addition, the exclusion of citizens based on their status can have more negative implications for the health of the disadvantaged. The displacement of poor drug users to the spatial periphery of cities moves these socially disadvantaged citizens away from valuable health and social services, while reducing their access to safe injection sites (Shoveller et al., 2008). It is evident that the physical displacement of disadvantaged people has immediate and serious health effects. By widening pre-existing disparities in health, the neoliberal policing of communal space contributes to social inequality in urban centers.

**The Risk-Based Nature of Policing**

Organizing policing initiatives in a neoliberal context typically demands the adoption of risk-based governance in place of traditional ones. In today’s society, the traditional forms of authoritarian social control such as overt deterrence and compliance lack practicality (Fischer & Poland, 1998). Risk-based policing, a manifestation of risk-based governance, contrasts the traditional reactionary approach and has been largely influenced by the idea of ‘broken windows’, which posits that small disruptions to the physical environment eventually manifest themselves in forms of social disorder. By engaging citizens on the basis of risk, even before
they have violated the law or social order, neoliberal policing has the tendency to make unjust assumptions. While reactionary policing typically requires an individual to commit an offense prior to interacting with police, risk-based governance in policing has led to a much more proactive approach which has its own unintended consequences. Risk-based policing typically marks the poor as high-risk and therefore in need of police intervention. Fischer and Poland (1998) found that the socially marginalized, such as those who smoke tobacco and use illicit drugs, are disproportionately the targets of social control by the policing institution. By eliminating these sources of risk, either by physically displacing them to one neighbourhood or introducing them to the criminal justice system rather than the appropriate healthcare services, risk-based policing segregates the ‘risky’ from the ‘non-risky’ in a way that widens disparities in health.

**The Use of Legitimized Violence**

In their efforts to regulate space and maintain transience in the neoliberal context, the police often rely on coercive force and legitimized violence which further perpetuates the poor’s negative social experience of everyday life. This force, however, is typically reserved for use on uncooperative, low status citizens. Within geographic areas that are physically deteriorating, coercive force is more commonly used by police and accepted by residents as a necessary mechanism to exert social control (Paes-Machado & Noronha, 2002). As a result, the economically disadvantaged tend to be disproportionately subjected to physical force and intimidation at the hands of both state and non-state police actors. Excessive force in the form of police brutality is most frequently directed towards the financially disadvantaged, visible minorities and those living in run-down neighbourhoods (Paes-Machado & Noronha, 2002). This increased propensity to engage a disadvantaged citizen physically has the potential to cause
injury, invoke reactivity and create cultural mistrust between the police and those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged. In their empirical study, Paes-Machado and Noronha (2002) found that police commit fewer abuses and give more leeway to wealthy individuals because they have the social means to protest, complain, and grab the attention of regulating bodies and other political authorities. This illustrates the cyclical effect of disadvantage in which society’s marginalized are subjected to biased treatment at the hands of police.

Citizenship Responsibilization

Neoliberalism is characterized by social control that is embedded in social norms of self-governance and responsibilization of the citizen. Neoliberal rationalities, policies, and practices by the state are contributing to responsibilization so that marginalized populations can be more easily controlled (Peter & Comack, 2007). Through initiatives such as neighbourhood watch and downtown ambassador programs, individuals are encouraged to govern themselves and other people who are present in the community. In this sense, policing is distributed to and expected of all of society’s citizens. This increasing level of self-responsibility, however, unintendedly provides the state police with a lack of accountability when social norms and official laws are broken. Since the average citizen is now primarily responsible for their own safety, police can more easily neglect and avoid the blame for problems among the socially disadvantaged in society. By crossing the fine line between self-responsibility and blaming by police, disadvantaged women who are the victims of sexual assault have experienced injustice and further victimization after the crime has taken place (Peter & Comack, 2007). This victim blaming by the policing institution tends to fall disproportionately on the shoulders of victims who are members of groups that already experience social inequality in their day to day lives, such as women, visible minorities, and the poor. It is apparent that the neoliberal ideal of a
responsibilized society provides policing with a useful tool to avoid blame when dealing with populations who lack a political voice.

Policing as a Form of Punishment

In the neoliberal context, policing continues to occur at each stage of the criminal justice system. After being arrested, criminals are policed and subjected to continuous surveillance from the time they are processed at the police station until the end of their sentence has been served. The punitive approach in policing, which emphasizes punishment over rehabilitation, unjustly places those who are incarcerated onto declining social trajectories. By separating individuals from the mainstream population, incarceration largely eliminates access to healthcare services and confines ‘high-risk’ individuals to sub-populations of society that have high levels of disease and a culture that is widely considered to be deviant (Freudenberg, 2002). Furthermore, even among populations of offenders, policing by jail guards and other legal authorities results in worse outcomes for the socially disadvantaged, demonstrating the layered nature of inequality in the criminal justice system. Neoliberal policing policies within correctional facilities dramatically contribute to health disparities between white women and women who are members of visible minority groups (Freudenberg, 2002). In this sense, neoliberal policing strategies exacerbate the disparities between the social advantaged and disadvantaged.

The Customer Service Model

As evident in the mission statements of police services, even state-run policing agencies have adopted the capitalist market principles that are characteristic of the neoliberal ideology. Police services now emphasize a customer service environment, competitive wages for their employees and equitable working conditions. It appears as though police services hire and
benefit officers equally in an unbiased manner, but even the experience of individuals who are employed by the police are characterized by inequality. The socioeconomic status of both recruits and officers plays a significant role in the resources they are entitled to and the career path they embark on. Research by Sapp and Carter (1990) indicates that many police services today have policies that support formal education in their officers and implement ‘informal’ college criterion when evaluating officers who are being considered for employment and promotion. Although on the surface these policies seem harmless, they actually negatively influence economic and occupational achievement for individuals with low socioeconomic status in a way that perpetuates disadvantage among officers (Sapp & Carter, 1990). Individuals who have less access to formal education, face a challenging setback in their attempt to become police officers and subsequently rise through the occupational structure of police services. The unsurprising result is that the police today are primarily made up of socially advantaged individuals and the majority of officers are white males (Sapp and Carter, 1990). At the macro-level, these policies create a demographic of police officers that lacks sympathy for the socially disadvantaged who they are responsible for policing, a fact which leads to the widening of disparities in the treatment of citizens.

**Transformative Initiatives**

What are some potential transformative initiatives that can restore policing equality and redistribute power to the socially disadvantaged living in a neoliberal society? Research shows that when the police are consulted and included in efforts to reduce the negative treatment of the socially disadvantaged, the programs developed have the ability to work and lessen disparities between those with high and low socioeconomic status (Wood et al., 2008). Efforts to reform policing are not futile. First and foremost, regulatory bodies must be introduced in order to hold
the wide range of policing agencies that exist today accountable, both for their policies and for the actions of their officers. In addition to greater regulation, policing agents operating in communal spaces need to be mindful of the disadvantaged populations they are responsible for policing and direct those who are ill or disorderly towards health and social services that have the potential to empower them. Practices of police brutality need to stop and legitimized violence by officers must be controlled with an increase in regulatory policies. Risk-based policing, especially in the insurance industry, must operate in a manner that diminishes its embedded discriminatory nature. Although responsibilization has the potential to create a safer society, police services need to avoid victim blaming when crime does occur and when criminals are caught, rehabilitation efforts should be prioritized when possible. Finally, police services need to hold true to their mission statements by devising and implementing policy which ensures the equal treatment of officers regardless of race, gender, economic status, and education level. If thoughtful initiatives are begun which involve both the police and the public, positive change can occur.

Conclusion

Through the analysis above, this paper has argued that neoliberal ideology in policing has led to several changes that have accrued numerous resources to the socially advantaged while exacerbating the disadvantage experienced by those with low socioeconomic status. The disparities caused by the recent shifts discussed have origins in the neoliberal structure of policing as an institution. This paper has critiqued the sources of inequality within policing and has suggested some transformative initiatives which have the potential to more equally distribute the public good that the police produce. With socio-political improvements to policing’s
structure, enhancements to this vital institution can be implemented and the socially
disadvantaged can experience more just outcomes with police.
References


