
by Andrew V. Papachristos, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Some of sociology’s most venerable urban ethnographies chronicle the ways in which residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods adapt, contort, and tweak formal methods of control or else develop informal mechanisms as they go about their daily lives. Ethnographers, however, frequently overlook—or simply avoid—systemic inquiry into those doing the controlling, especially the police. In so doing, scholars often take for granted the dynamic and powerful role of the police in disadvantaged communities. Peter Moskos’s book, Cop in the Hood: My Year Policing Baltimore’s Eastern District, reveals the ways in which the daily routines, cultural practices, personal habits, and working conditions of police affect disadvantaged neighborhoods and those who live in them. Moskos displays ethnographic chutzpah by forgoing more traditional methods of participant observation, such as attending community policing meetings or going on ride-alongs, in favor of a more dramatic approach: Moskos (literally) became a police officer. For 20 months, Moskos worked for the Baltimore Police Department, graduated from the police academy, and worked as a police officer in one of Baltimore’s highest-crime neighborhoods. Such full access to police sources leaves readers with a simple yet important finding: just like those neighborhood residents whom they “serve and protect,” police devise complex ways to administer formal and informal social control as they negotiate social mandates, individual morality, professional obligations, and personal networks. To be sure, Cop in the Hood is no apologia for police, nor does it dismiss the harsh consequences of the war on drugs. Instead, it offers a candid investigation of the day-to-day arenas in which legal policies are enacted as well as the power afforded to those charged with enforcing the law. The end result is perhaps the best sociological account on what it means to police a modern ghetto.

Cop in the Hood takes the reader on a journey through the contradictions, personalities, bureaucracies, and habitus involved in contemporary policing. The book begins by describing the ins and outs of police education, ranging from formal academy training (chap. 2) and on-the-job training (chap. 3) to the acquisition of specific cultural practices of both the “thin blue line” and “thug life” (chap. 4). The second half of the book describes the dilemmas of modern responsive policing techniques (chap. 5) and the social construction of police discretion and its impact on disadvantaged communities (chap. 6). Written in a self-admitted style of “gonzo journalism” (p. 6), Cop in the Hood is an ethnography, peppered with a bit of autobiography, that no doubt appeals to a broader readership. Although sociologists who prefer more formal academic prose might find this style distracting, Cop in the Hood tells a great story centered around notions of race, power, and social control.

While Cop in the Hood contributes to several debates within urban sociology and criminology, the book’s greatest contribution is the demystification of police and police culture. Moskos describes his fellow officers not as power-hungry, thrill-seeking bullies, but as a well-meaning yet frustrated lot who marshal their own foibles and strengths to cope with unique job conditions and ambiguous political and legal decrees. For instance, officers’ opinions about the war on drugs are highly variable: some cops see it as an essential moral battleground, but the majority of cops see it as a futile war with questionable moral underpinnings (e.g., p. 85). Such
ambiguities create disparities in police behavior and even create important social cleavages. Some cops make few drug arrests and insist that policing is not about the number of arrests, but about interacting with people and stopping “real” (i.e., violent or property) crimes. Other cops make a high number of arrests because of personal beliefs regarding drug use and criminality, the economic benefit derived from making arrests (“collars for dollars”—i.e., getting paid to go to court), or a desire for career advancement. This informal social organization has important societal implications, in that the actions of a small number of high-arrest officers, and not necessarily widespread police activity, drive arrest rates in high-crime neighborhoods (interestingly, the same pattern appears to be true of street crime: a small number of high-offending individuals most often tend to drive crime rates in high-crime neighborhoods).

Moskos also provides a candid look at the ways police conceive of race and ethnicity. When talking about race, officers openly confound race, neighborhood context, and culture. In one of the more overtly racist remarks Moskos recounts, an instructor at the police academy described life in poor Baltimore neighborhoods as a nexus of family values and race: “It was a shame to see kids raised by parents who couldn’t raise them, with chicken bones and garbage all over the house, and have it all paid for by the tax payer . . . I don’t want to name any ‘nationalities,’ you can figure out what I’m talking about” (p. 19). Yet, most officers are not explicit racists. Rather, police embrace a conception of criminality akin to the culture-of-poverty paradigm. Most police, both black and white officers alike, explain crime not as a product of race and poverty, but as a product of values, behaviors, and practices. Often relying on their own upbringing in poor and working-class neighborhoods, police attribute crime to the “thug life” lifestyle and the behaviors it promotes. Cops often see this culture of crime as a colorless concept, or, as one cop explained, “I got nothing against black people. I just don’t like these black people. I don’t care what color you are. If they were white people acting this way, I wouldn’t like them any better. Hell, I’d probably like them worse” (p. 41). The interesting point here is that while academics might wish to employ our chic cultural rhetoric to make sense of police behavior, cops have a rather clear notion of culture and crime that they use to explain both crime and their individual and professional responses to it. The task for the academic reader, then, is to figure out ways to rectify our own valued nomenclature with the empirical reality described by Moskos.

Anyone interested in the study of disadvantaged neighborhoods should read this book, if only to understand the ways in which police influence the daily life in modern cities. The book is not without its faults, however, the most important of which are the numerous encounters pertaining to race and culture that beg for more rigorous sociological analysis. Still, I would argue—and I think Moskos would agree—that it is difficult to understand the intricate street ballet of city life without understanding all the dancers and the rhythms involved. And Cop in the Hood demonstrates how the average beat cop determines the tempo of street interactions.