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Controlling Suburban and Small-Town Hoods

An Examination of Police Encounters With Juveniles

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We currently lack systematic observational data concerning street-level interactions between police and juveniles in nonurban jurisdictions. This study uses systematic social observation (SSO) methods to examine the nature and character of police encounters with juveniles age 13 to 17 years in 20 suburban and small-town jurisdictions in terms of (a) the types of problems nonurban officers confronted while interacting with juveniles, (b) the actions taken by officers to resolve these problems, and (c) the discretionary decision making of officers in arrest situations involving juveniles. The findings suggest similarities and differences between nonurban officers and previously studied urban officers in terms of how they interact with juveniles. A discussion regarding how these findings may be interpreted is offered, highlighting the general need for more research concerning street-level interactions between police and juveniles, and the importance of including samples of nonurban communities in studies of police–juvenile encounters.

Keywords: *nonurban policing; policing juveniles; observational studies of police*

Researchers have long recognized the integral role performed by police in the control of juveniles, often describing cops as the "gatekeepers" to the juvenile justice system. Police are regularly the first point of contact between the system and youthful offenders, and their decisions concerning when and how to intervene with kids frequently shape the options that are available to other actors in the system (Klein, 1976; Wolcott, 2005). Despite the importance of cops within the juvenile system, research concerning police and their interactions with youthful offenders has often been relegated to the periphery of juvenile justice scholarship. Instead, research interest in the control of juveniles has historically focused on the operations and impact of the separate system of juvenile justice created by progressive-era reformers and the interplay between that system and the adult system of justice (Bernard, 1992; Platt, 1969; Ryerson, 1978; Wolcott, 2005).

The limited amount of coverage devoted to police in juvenile justice texts demonstrates the relatively minor contribution of policing research within the field. Current juvenile justice texts typically address the role of police in a single chapter or otherwise subsume the topic within discussions regarding the more general use of discretion in the juvenile system as a whole (del Carmen & Trulson, 2006; R. W. Taylor, Fritsch, & Caeti, 2006; Whitehead & Lab, 1999). Likewise, recent publications in juvenile justice journals most commonly concern the handling of juveniles after they have interacted with the police, including studies relating to

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juvenile court processing, evaluations of juvenile corrections programs, and juvenile waivers to adult court.

The relative absence of recent scholarship concerning police as actors in the juvenile justice system appears to be at least partially attributable to general trends in the subject matter of police research over time (National Research Council, 2004). Beginning in the 1960s, studies concerning police interactions with urban juveniles provided ample data to explore the exercise of officer discretion and its determinants because officers commonly resolved these encounters informally without an arrest (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman, Sykes, & Clark, 1978; Piliavin & Briar, 1964). Research concerning the street-level behavior of officers and the determinants of discretion declined in the 1970s; however, as a result research interest in the policing of juveniles has waned in favor of a wide range of other topics that have garnered the attention of policing scholars (Bazemore & Senjo, 1997; National Research Council, 2004). In short, the absence of current empirical information concerning how juveniles interact with those at the "front end" of the justice system (i.e., police) has contributed to a preponderance of research that has focused on issues related to handling them at the "back end" of the system.

Another reason for the lack of current empirical research concerning police interactions with juveniles, as well as face-to-face contacts with the police and the public more generally, is the fact that these fleeting street-level encounters are difficult or impossible to examine using official data such as arrest or dispatch records (Mastrofski et al., 1998). Much of the work police perform with juveniles involves functions that fall outside the realm of traditional law enforcement, such as the maintenance of public order, the enforcement of nuisance offenses, or the provision of services. In most cases, official data cannot provide meaningful information concerning these episodes precisely because they typically do not involve arrests or other types of "real police work" that are likely to appear on an official report.

One objective of the current study is to augment the existing but somewhat dated literature concerning street-level interactions between police and juveniles using data collected through the systematic social observation of police officers in 20 suburban and small-town police agencies. Specifically, data are presented concerning: (a) the types of problems these officers confronted while interacting with juveniles, (b) the actions taken by officers to resolve problems that they confronted with juveniles, and (c) the discretionary decision making of officers in arrest situations involving juveniles.

A secondary objective of the current study relates to the fact that these police–juvenile encounters occurred in suburban and small-town jurisdictions rather than highly urbanized central cities. Policing research has primarily focused on the behavior of officers employed by large urban departments; a situation that has resulted in what Walker (1983) has defined as a "big city bias" in policing theory and research. The tendency for policing researchers to focus almost exclusively on the behavior of "big city" cops has created gaps in our knowledge concerning how suburban and small-town police do their jobs and interact with the citizens—especially juvenile offenders (Klofas, 2000; Liederbach, 2005; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Maquire, Kuhns, Uchida, & Cox, 1997; Weisheit, Falcone, & Wells, 1996).

Although this "big city bias" in the policing literature has created gaps in our knowledge concerning the work of nonurban officers, there has also been a parallel trend in the juvenile delinquency literature to focus predominantly on the offending behavior of urban rather than

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suburban or rural youths (Osgood & Chambers, 2003; Weisheit et al., 1996). This tendency to focus on urban juveniles appears to be a function of long-standing notions regarding the causes of delinquency. Researchers have traditionally discussed the origins of delinquency within the context of problems resulting from the social and cultural conditions of socially disorganized central cities, such as poverty, family disruption, and residential instability (Bursik, 1988; Sampson & Groves, 1989; Shaw & McKay, 1972). In addition, the fact that violent crime rates are consistently lower in suburban and rural locales probably works to focus attention on the violent offending behavior of some urban youth because these types of crimes often garner the attention of policy makers and the media.

In cases where nonurban juveniles have been the focus of attention, researchers have highlighted the influence of social and ecological conditions uniquely associated with suburban and rural places and the impact of these contextual features on nonurban delinquency. For example, suburban delinquency has been described as a “leisure activity” of wealthy, unregulated youths who relieve their boredom through acts of vandalism, petty thefts, and alcohol or drug use (Popenoe, 1985; Tobias & Denomme, 1973; Levine & Kozak, 1979). Alternately, the structural characteristics of some isolated rural “backwaters”—especially high rates of poverty—appear to produce delinquent behavior in a manner similar to that found within crime-ridden urban neighborhoods (Osgood & Chambers, 1999). Rural delinquency may also be related to an absence of community resources and a lack of social services for youth in rural places (National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders, 1997; Weisheit & Donnermeyer, 2000).

Still, the relative lack of information concerning rural and suburban delinquency has intersected with the “big city” bias in policing scholarship to create a significant need for data concerning police–juvenile encounters in nonurban areas. We currently have very little empirical information concerning how police interact with juveniles in nonurban settings, and systematic observations of suburban and small-town officers have yet to explore the nature and character of street-level encounters between police and nonurban youth. Prior to describing the method used in the current study, a brief overview of what prior literature has found in terms of street-level police–juvenile encounters is presented. Although this literature has primarily focused on the control of teenagers in central cities, the findings do provide a basis of knowledge concerning what is generally known regarding encounters between police and juveniles.

Prior Research on Street-Level Police–Juvenile Encounters

Street-level police encounters with urban teenagers were the subject of several classic studies of police conducted during the 1960s and 1970s—studies that continue to provide a basis for understanding the nature and character of police interactions with juveniles today despite the fact that they were conducted at least 30 years ago (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman et al., 1978; Piliavin & Briar, 1964; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). The method used in these early studies was qualitative and ethnographic, and policing scholars studied police by simply “walking around” with them (Bittner, 1970; National Research Council, 2004). This line of research did, however, work to identify some elements that are common to street-level encounters between officers and juveniles.

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First, police interactions with juveniles have invariably been described as problematic and "tension-filled" events, primarily because juveniles are more likely than adults to be subjected to surveillance, harassment, and degradation at the hands of police (Baumgartner, 1988; Black, 1980; Haller, 1976; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). For example, the tendency for urban youths to congregate and "hang out" in public domains such as street corners increases the potential for conflict between juveniles and the police. Juveniles are also especially inviting targets for police scrutiny because they disproportionately commit a number of crimes, including a variety of nuisance offenses, arson, and motor vehicle theft (Lynch, 2002). The negative tone of police–juvenile encounters also appears to be shaped by existing beliefs and attitudes. Youth surveys consistently show that juveniles have more negative attitudes toward police than do adults (Friedman, Lurigio, Greenleaf, & Albertson, 2004; Taylor et al., 2001; Whitehead & Lab, 1999). Negative attitudes on the part of juveniles work to increase the amount of tension between them and police and also appear to provide a basis for the confrontational demeanor that youths often display to police on the street. For their part, juveniles contend that they are often ridiculed, humiliated, and disrespected by police who encounter them (Herz, 2002).

Second, encounters between police and juveniles most commonly involve less serious, nonviolent crimes. Official statistics show that juveniles account for a large percentage of arrests for minor property crimes and/or alcohol and drug violations. As such, juvenile arrests for violent personal crimes are relatively rare (Snyder, 1997, 2005). For example, no more than 1 in 360 persons between age 10 and 17 years (or about one third of 1% of all juveniles in the United States age 10 to 17 years) were arrested for a Violent Crime Index offense in 2003 (Snyder, 2005).[1] Moreover, official arrest statistics cannot provide data concerning the myriad of juvenile offenses that do not result in an arrest—the bulk of which are presumably nonviolent and less serious including disorderly conduct, loitering, noncriminal disputes, and minor delinquency offenses (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman et al., 1978; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967).

Third, because the underlying problems that police confront with juveniles typically involve nonviolent, less serious offenses, officers regularly use their discretion to dispose of these situations informally without an arrest. Findings from the classic observational studies conducted in the 1960s and 1970s found that up to 85% of police–juvenile encounters are concluded informally by officers in the field, an indication that most police–juvenile encounters remain "invisible" to official arrest statistics (Black & Reiss, 1970, p. 68; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967). In addition, more recent research regarding relations between police and juveniles provides some evidence to suggest that reforms associated with the community policing movement may work to increase the amount of officer discretion with juveniles, especially in cases where police have been designated as "community specialists" (Bazemore & Senjo, 1997). Finally, recent observations of urban officers found that only 13% of those juveniles who were encountered were arrested (Myers, 2004).

In cases where officers do arrest juveniles, it appears that patterns of officer decision making parallel those observed for adult offenders (National Research Council, 2004). The decision to arrest is most heavily influenced by legal considerations such as offense seriousness, the presence of evidence of wrongdoing, and preferences of the complainant (Black, 1971; Lundman et al., 1978; Smith & Visher, 1981). Studies specifically concerning

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juveniles indicate that officers are most likely to arrest youths for serious (felony) crimes in which a significant amount of evidence is present (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman et al., 1978; Myers, 2004; Sealock & Simpson, 1998).

There is also considerable evidence to suggest that extralegal factors such as citizen demeanor, social class, sex, and race exert an influence on the decision to arrest (Lundman, 1998; Smith & Visher, 1981). In terms of the specific decision to arrest juvenile offenders, it appears that police are more likely to arrest youths when they are disrespectful toward police and/or when a complainant prefers that an arrest be made. Moreover, evidence from the classic studies of the 1960s and 1970s as well as more recent research suggests that police are more likely to arrest and detain minority juveniles than their White counterparts (Black & Reiss, 1970; Lundman et al., 1978; Sealock & Simpson, 1998; Werthman & Piliavin, 1967).

Description of Study Sites

The sites for the current study are 20 nonurban police departments in southwestern Ohio (see Table 1). These agencies employ an average of fewer than 20 sworn officers (386 total) and serve a combined population of approximately 219,000. The jurisdictions include 15 suburban communities located in Hamilton County that surround the city of Cincinnati, Ohio, the commercial and residential hub of the region. The sample also includes four communities located in Clermont County, which borders Hamilton County to the east and is more geographically isolated from Cincinnati's urban core. The remaining study site straddles the borders of three adjacent counties (Hamilton, Clermont, and Warren counties).

Although the study sites are largely homogenous in terms of their racial composition (more than 90% White on average), they are diverse in terms of other demographic characteristics, including population (range 899-60,144), median income (range U.S. $20,781-$95,530), and median home value (range $66,200-$288,889). In descriptive terms, these sites include two affluent residential suburbs (Amberley Village, Terrace Park), five middle-class residential suburbs (Colerain Township, Delhi Township, Loveland, Milford, Forest Park), two middle-class suburbs that are highly commercialized (Blue Ash, Sharonville), six working-class suburbs (Cheviot, Deer Park, Reading, Arlington Heights, Fairfax, Lockland), and five small towns that are more sparsely populated and rural in character than the suburban jurisdictions (Amelia Village, Goshen Township, Harrison, Felicity, Williamsburg).

Method

Data concerning police encounters with juveniles were collected during direct observations of police officers conducted by a research team from the University of Cincinnati, Division of Criminal Justice, as part of a larger project funded by the National Institute of Justice.[2] The method used in the field was systematic social observation (SSO) (Mastrofski et al., 1998). The main procedures used in SSO include the development of instruments to

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Table 1
The Nonurban Jurisdictions

	Observed Shifts[a]	Sworn Officers	Population 2000	% White	Median Income ($)	Median Home Value ($)
Amberley Village	28.47	15	3,425	86.9	81,492	206,750
Amelia Village	31.97	4	2,752	96.8	44,900	111,300
Arlington Heights	30.40	13	899	91.9	30,288	72,464
Blue Ash	30.51	34	12,513	86.4	61,591	146,476
Cheviot	30.22	23	9,015	96.3	35,150	85,719
Colerain Township	33.00	24	60,144	87.8	49,960	98,000
Deer Park	29.89	11	5,982	96.1	39,692	92,394
Delhi Township	33.63	32	30,104	97.7	55,052	115,700
Fairfax	32.91	12	1,938	96.4	41,418	89,976
Felicity	21.27	2	922	97.7	20,781	66,200
Forest Park	32.42	40	19,463	36.1	49,298	94,910
Goshen Township	22.31	7	13,663	98.9	46,314	101,600
Harrison	30.79	21	7,487	98.2	46,107	104,500
Lockland	32.02	18	3,707	69.9	28,292	72,077
Loveland	32.06	23	11,677	94.9	52,738	129,642
Milford	32.74	14	6,284	95.1	31,923	117,100
Reading	32.36	18	11,292	91.4	39,140	93,168
Sharonville	32.64	56	13,804	87.5	47,055	116,485
Terrace Park	33.27	14	2,273	98.2	95,530	288,889
Williamsburg	28.95	5	2,322	98.7	37,115	85,800

a. 8-hr shift equivalent.

collect and record observations systematically, and the subsequent investigation of those activities through direct observation (Reiss, 1971). SSO differs from the qualitative and ethnographic methodologies used by researchers to study patrol officers in the 1960s and 1970s in terms of (a) the use of predesigned protocols and data collection instruments, (b) the employment of a large number of observers, and (c) the inclusion of large samples of officers (National Research Council, 2004).

Observed officers were accompanied by trained observers who recorded everything the officers did during their entire shift, including the activities that the officer performed and information regarding the nature of their interactions with juveniles and other citizens.[3] The current study utilizes a framework similar to that outlined by Mastrofski et al. (1998) to systematically organize and record the observer's field notes into reliable coded data. Coding instruments were developed to record information regarding the officer's interactions with juveniles including (a) the encounter and/or activity instrument and (b) the citizen instrument.

The encounter and/or activity instrument accounted for every minute of the observed officer's shift time, whether he or she was in direct contact with citizens or performing tasks that did not include citizens such as motor patrol, report writing, or driving en route to and from locations. A citizen instrument was completed for each individual juvenile encountered by the observed officers. The citizen instrument was used to classify encounters as "brief" (encounters of less than 1 min that involved police business), "casual" (encounters that did

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not involve police business), or "full" (encounters greater than 1 min in length that involved police business). In addition, the citizen instrument provided information concerning the nature and character of the interaction including the juvenile's demographic characteristics, demeanor, offenses (if any), types of problems encountered, and other situational factors related to each encounter. These situational factors included requests made by the juvenile to the officer, police law enforcement actions (e.g., arrests, citations, searches, use of force), officer requests made to the juvenile, and factors surrounding any disputes among juveniles and/or other citizens.

Data were collected over a 14-month period between April 1999 and May 2000. The research team randomly selected shifts to be observed within the 20 agencies to complete 2.5 observations per month per department over the course of the 14-month project.[4] Observations were conducted with 213 individual officers employed by the sampled 20 nonurban agencies. A total of 583 observations were completed encompassing 4,813 hrs of observation, or the equivalent of more than 611 8-hr shifts.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Observational Data

The primary advantage of observational data is that the method allows the researcher to obtain information that is difficult or impossible to collect through other methods, especially in terms of the nature and character of officer interactions with citizens. For example, direct observation provides the only means to collect information regarding juveniles and other citizens that the police encounter outside the traditional law enforcement realm, including disputants or other types of criminal suspects who are not arrested, service recipients, witnesses or third parties not contained in official reports, and citizens who encounter officers on a casual and/or personal basis. Likewise, direct observation allows the researcher to record information concerning those encounters that are initiated through means other than dispatch records, including those initiated by the officers themselves or citizens in the officers' immediate presence.

Although observational data can be an especially effective means to garner information on citizen encounters that would otherwise be of low visibility to the researcher, the method does lend itself to the danger of reactivity. An officer and/or citizen may change his or her behavior simply because of the presence of the observer. The research team endeavored to limit the danger of reactivity by several means:

1. The research team promised confidentiality to individual officers who were observed, as is required by the federal sponsoring agency. Confidentiality agreements were signed by all observers in accordance with these requirements.
2. A certain level of confidence and familiarity between the observers and the officers was established. All observers were instructed to outline the confidential nature of the information they obtained to the officer at the beginning of each shift, and they told officers that they were free to view the observer's notes at any time during the observation.
3. Observers were instructed to avoid taking notes while in the presence of citizens, so as to avoid citizen inquiries and/or influencing the events that were observed. If necessary, observers would record information immediately after the encounter occurred, or while the officer performed routine patrol.

Observers were instructed to indicate whether or not they believed observed officers and/or citizens had altered their behavior because of the observer's presence. Indications of

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reactivity on the part of either the observed officer and/or citizens that were apparent to the observer occurred very infrequently. Observers indicated that some sort of reactivity occurred in 34 of the 17,480 total observed officer activities and citizen interactions recorded during the course of the study.

Observational data also has a potential problem with reliability in terms of maintaining consistent coding procedures across observers. The research team endeavored to limit these concerns through observer training courses conducted prior to and during the study period. As Reiss (1971) suggested, observers viewed videotapes to practice coding typical police activities. In addition to these training sessions, observer data were reviewed and cleaned on an ongoing basis during the length of the project to ensure that all observers were following the coding standards set forth during the training sessions, thus providing a continuing check on the reliability of the observation data.

Findings

There are a number of ways to examine the time officers spent encountering juveniles. The current study presents data concerning the nature and character of these interactions in three separate ways. First, police–juvenile encounters are described in terms of the different types of problems that officers confronted while they encountered juveniles. Second, data are presented concerning the actions undertaken by the observed officers to resolve these problems, including the use of both legal remedies (i.e., arrest and/or citation) as well as more informal means of control. Third, data concerning police–juvenile encounters that resulted in an arrest are presented. These cases are compared to cases that involved juveniles who had committed a criminal offense but were not arrested to provide information regarding the use of officer discretion with juvenile suspects.

Problems Encountered With Juveniles

There were 195 encounters with juveniles between ages 13 to 17 years during the course of the study.[5] To identify the underlying reason for these police–juvenile encounters, observers coded the encounters using one of 260 problem codes. Table 2 presents the number of times officers encountered different types of problems with juveniles in terms of several broader problem categories to more easily identify what types of problems the observed officers handled.[6]

Traffic problems were the most frequently encountered type of problem with juveniles ($n = 41$), and excess speed was the most frequently encountered problem of the 260 possible problem codes ($n = 15$). Crime-related problems were also quite common ($n = 35$); however, these problems were almost exclusively crimes of low seriousness. For example, the most frequently occurring crime problems were misdemeanor thefts and alcohol violations. Common order maintenance problems ($n = 40$) included curfew violations, runaways, minor disturbances, or juveniles loitering in public places. Taken together, problems related to crime, order maintenance, or investigations (e.g., suspicious persons or circumstances) accounted for more than one half (51.2%) of all police–juvenile encounters. Service problems ($n = 23$) most often involved instances where juveniles were the subject of general police concern, or they were the driver of a disabled vehicle.

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Table 2
Problems Encountered With Juveniles

Type of Problem	Frequency	(%) Total Encounters
Traffic		
Excess speed	15	
Traffic accident (property damage only)	9	
Moving violation	5	
Equipment violation	4	
Other traffic	8	
Subtotal traffic	41	21.0
Crime related		
Missing and/or stolen property	4	
Theft unspecified	4	
Alcohol violation	3	
Other crime related	24	
Subtotal crime related	35	17.9
Order maintenance		
Juvenile problem and/or disturbance	10	
Domestic argument	6	
Loitering	4	
Curfew violation	4	
Runaway	4	
Other order maintenance	12	
Subtotal order maintenance	40	20.5
Investigative		
Suspicious person	6	
Meet complainant	3	
Interrogation	3	
Other investigative	13	
Subtotal investigative	25	12.8
Service		
Juvenile subject of police concern	5	
Disabled vehicle	3	
Other service	15	
Subtotal service	23	11.7
Personal and/or casual		
Casual conversation	10	
Personal business	6	
Subtotal personal and/or casual	16	8.2
Administrative crime related	7	3.5
Information gathering	6	3.0
Community service	2	1.0
Total police–juvenile encounters	195	

Police Actions in Juvenile Encounters

Aside from presenting data that summarizes the underlying problems that officers confronted with juveniles, the current study also aims to more closely examine the dynamics of these encounters in terms of what actions were undertaken by the officers to resolve these

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problems because much of the prior literature suggests that cops often utilize informal and less restrictive sanctions when attempting to control youths. In this way, the observational data can be used to indicate the manner in which police officers act as street-level "gatekeepers" in police–juvenile encounters that occur in nonurban settings.

Table 3 presents the actions taken by police against individual juveniles who were the subject of "full" encounters (n = 211) in terms of what type of "role" the juvenile was observed to take on at the beginning of the encounter. It is useful to categorize the juveniles in terms of different roles primarily because the type of action taken by police should vary depending on the nature of the role those juveniles were observed to assume when they initially encountered police. For example, juveniles who are initially encountered in the role of suspects or disputants can be expected to elicit different types of police actions than those who are victims, witnesses, or service recipients.

Overall, juveniles were most likely to encounter police as either suspects or disputants, as 138 of the total 211 juveniles who were the subject of full encounters (65.4%) initially assumed these roles. Despite the fact that police were most likely to encounter juveniles in law enforcement–related roles, the number of actual arrests was quite low. Only 23 of the 138 juveniles who initially assumed the role of suspects and/or disputants (16%) were arrested. In the absence of an arrest, police were most likely to resort to other, more informal means of control including simply telling the juvenile to cease the behavior (57% of all suspects and/or disputants who were not arrested), interrogating the juvenile (37%), or threatening to charge the juvenile with a criminal offense (20%). Suspects and/or disputants who were not arrested were sometimes subjected to some type of physical force (18%)—most often a firm grip hold or nonpain restraint method of control—as well as a citation (17%) and/or a search of their person or property (17%).[7]

The remaining 73 juveniles who were encountered assumed roles other than that of suspect or disputant. Police actions in these types of encounters were invariably less confrontational than those involving suspects and/or disputants. Prior research has typically described police–juvenile encounters as acrimonious and tension-filled events, primarily because many studies have focused exclusively on the decision to arrest juveniles who were criminal suspects at the exclusion of those juveniles who encounter police as witnesses, victims, or service recipients. For example, juveniles who were third parties and/or witnesses were most likely to be asked to provide some type of information to police (36% of all third party and/or witnesses). Juveniles who were victims were also commonly asked for information (36% of all victims), and asked to call the police if they were victimized again (24%). Police often comforted and/or reassured juveniles who were victims (33%). The most commonly occurring remaining role was service recipient. These juveniles were most often reassured and/or told to seek help from family or friends to solve their problem.

Officer Discretion in Arrest Situations

Table 4 presents a comparison of juveniles who were arrested to cases that involved juveniles who had committed a criminal offense but were not arrested in terms of the juveniles' demographic characteristics, the type of offense that was committed, and certain situational factors. A total of 25 juveniles were arrested, while 34 juveniles committed criminal offenses

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Table 3
Police Actions in Juvenile Encounters

	Juvenile Citizen Roles				
	Suspect and/or Disputant	3rd Party and/or Witness	Victim	Other Role[a]	Total
Juvenile arrested	23	0	1	1	25
Juvenile not arrested	115	28	33	10	186
Total	138	28	34	11	211
If juvenile not arrested:	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
Juvenile cited	17	0	3	0	11
Juvenile interrogated	37	11	33	27	32
Juvenile told to cease behavior	57	0	15	27	47
Juvenile told to leave premises	4	0	0	9	11
Police threatened criminal charge	20	0	3	0	13
Police searched juvenile/ vehicle/area	17	11	3	0	12
Police threatened to use force	2	0	3	0	2
Police used physical force	18	0	0	0	11
Police asked juvenile to provide info	14	36	36	0	21
Juvenile told to use legal process	3	0	12	0	5
Juvenile told to seek help from others	10	19	6	27	17
Juvenile told to control another person	1	0	0	0	1
Juvenile told to call police again		4	24	0	8
Juvenile told to not call police again	1	0	0	0	1
Police comforted and/or reassured juvenile	10	14	33	91	16

a. Other role codes include service recipients, helpless persons, non-police service providers, and occupational acquaintances.

for which they were not arrested.[8] Overall, officers exercised considerable discretion, as less than one half (42%) of the juveniles who had committed an offense were arrested.

Males committed more than 86% (51 of 59) of all the observed offenses. Juveniles who were minorities and/or observed to be from a low social class were more likely to be arrested than other types of juveniles. For example, White juveniles committed 71% of all the offenses (42 of 59); however, they represented only 60% of those juveniles who were arrested (15 of 25). In contrast, juveniles who were minorities committed 29% of all the offenses (17 of 59); however, they represented 40% of those who were arrested (10 of 25).

Officers were likely to respond formally and arrest juveniles who had committed offenses related to alcohol and controlled substances. For example, more than one third (36%) of the

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Table 4
Officer Discretion in Arrest Situations

	Arrestees (*n* = 25)		Nonarrestees (*n* = 34)		Total	
		%		%		%
Demographic						
Male	22	88	29	85	51	86
White	15	60	27	79	42	71
Middle and/or upper middle class	14	56	22	65	36	61
Type of offense						
Alcohol and controlled substances	9	36	4	12	13	22
Status offenses	4	16	9	26	13	22
Offenses against persons	1	4	4	12	5	8
Offenses against property	6	24	8	23	14	24
Public order	5	20	9	26	14	24
Situational[a]						
Officer initiated	17	68	13	38	30	51
Dispatch and/or citizen initiated	7	28	21	61	28	47
Other citizen-requested arrest	5	20	9	26	14	24
Other citizen-requested no arrest	4	16	4	11	8	14
Officer or others observed act	15	60	16	47	31	53
Physical evidence present	17	68	10	29	27	46
Claims from others implicating juvenile	20	80	22	65	42	71
Juvenile confessed	9	36	20	59	29	49
Juvenile demeanor						
Deferential	6	24	20	59	26	44
Civil	5	20	5	15	10	17
Passive aggressive and/or hostile	14	56	9	26	23	39

a. Multiple situational characteristics will occur within individual encounters and within arrestee and nonarrestee categories. Therefore, percentages in the situational categories do not equal 100%.

arrests involved juveniles who possessed controlled substances, paraphernalia, alcohol, or were driving while intoxicated, and 9 of the 13 juveniles who committed these offenses (69%) were arrested. However, officers responded more informally to other types of offenses, including status offenses, public order offenses, and property offenses. For example, only 4 of the 13 juveniles who had committed a status offense (31%) were arrested, 5 of the 14 juveniles who had committed public order offenses (36%) were arrested, and 6 of the 14 juveniles who had committed property offenses (43%) were arrested. There were only 5 juveniles who committed an offense against a person (e.g., assault, domestic violence), and in four of these cases an arrest was not made. Overall, the offenses committed by juveniles could be considered relatively minor in terms of seriousness, and only 4 of the 59 total offenses were felonies—all of which were for possession of a controlled substance.

Encounters that involved an arrest were more likely to be initiated by the observed officer (68%) rather than citizens or a dispatched assignment than those that did not involve an arrest (38%). Often, officers did not arrest juvenile offenders even when considerable evidence existed that a crime had occurred. For example, officers personally observed 31 of

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the offenses; however, they made arrests in only 15 of these cases (48%). Likewise, in cases where officers heard claims from others (witnesses) that an offense had been committed, they made an arrest in only 48% of these cases (20 of 42). In terms of the requests made by other citizens that were present at the encounter, officers were more likely to comply with requests for leniency than they were requests for an arrest. For example, officers made an arrest in 5 of the 14 cases (36%) where citizens had requested an arrest, whereas officers failed to make an arrest in 4 of the 8 cases (50%) where citizens requested that an arrest not be made.

Officers were also lenient in cases where the juvenile was deferential to the officer. Officers arrested only 23% of the juveniles who were deferential (6 of 26), and 59% of nonarrestees were deferential to the officers (20 of 34). In contrast, officers were more likely to make arrests in cases where physical evidence was present and/or the juvenile was passively aggressive or hostile to the officer. For example, 14 of the 25 arrestees (56%) were passively aggressive or hostile to the officer, and 61% of all juveniles who were hostile were arrested.

Discussion

We currently lack systematic observational data concerning street-level encounters between police and juveniles in nonurban settings. This situation is the result of several intersecting trends including: (a) the tendency for researchers to focus on the adjudication of juveniles by the system after they have encountered the police, (b) the difficulties associated with obtaining large-scale, systematic data concerning street-level interactions between the police and citizens in general, and (c) the long-standing focus on "big city" cops and urban juveniles that has resulted in a relative absence of research in nonurban settings. The current study provides a systematic description of police–juvenile encounters in small towns and suburban jurisdictions. The data provide several points of discussion.

First, police–juvenile encounters in nonurban jurisdictions appear to be similar in some respects to those that occur in urbanized central cities, particularly in terms of the types of offenses that officers typically confront with juveniles. In the current study, encounters with nonurban juveniles who were criminal suspects and/or disputants almost always involved offenses that were of low seriousness and nonviolent, including minor disturbances, loitering, and misdemeanor thefts. These types of problems were also found to be prevalent in prior research concerning street-level encounters between police and urban juveniles. So too, police in nonurban settings appear to be similar to previously studied urban cops in terms of their tendency to resolve juvenile problems informally without an arrest. Only 16% of the juveniles who encountered police as suspects and/or disputants were arrested, and officers made an arrest in only 42% of the cases that involved juveniles who had committed a crime. These findings suggest that there are certain commonalities associated with street-level interactions between police and juveniles irrespective of whether these encounters occur in central cities, suburbs, or more rural jurisdictions. Specifically, the deviant behavior of juveniles will more often than not involve less serious offenses, and nonurban police appear to be just as inclined as urban cops to act as "gatekeepers" by resolving juvenile encounters informally without an arrest.

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These commonalities aside, findings from the current study may also be used to suggest ways in which police–juvenile encounters in nonurban places may differ from those that occur in central cities. In particular, the current study found that traffic-related offenses were the most commonly confronted problem in police–juvenile encounters. Nonurban police were more likely to confront juveniles in cars for such things as speeding, traffic accidents, and equipment violations than they were for criminal offenses, order maintenance problems, or service activities. It is surprising to note that traffic-related problems were more frequent than any other type of problem even though a portion of the juveniles included in the study (age 13 to 17 years) were not old enough to drive. The high number of traffic-related problems relative to other types of problems in the current study may simply be a research artifact; prior studies concerned with the control of urban teenagers have often excluded traffic-related encounters and have instead focused on police–juvenile encounters that occur on street corners and within other public spaces commonly found in central cities.

An alternate view merits consideration; however, the substantial number of traffic-related encounters between nonurban police and juveniles may be a function of the unique structural and cultural conditions associated with nonurban places, particularly some of the suburban jurisdictions included in the current study. Suburbs exhibit distinctive structural characteristics that set them apart from central cities (Baumgartner, 1988; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, & Speck, 2000; Jackson, 1985). For example, suburban places are less densely populated and more residential in character than central cities, a situation that has given rise to what has been described as a "commuter culture" in many suburban places. These conditions have made the automobile a ubiquitous feature of suburban life. In combination with a relative absence of public transportation, these factors have made the use of private automobiles more pervasive among suburban residents. Moreover, low population density also works to create an absence of pedestrians and street life. Given these structural and cultural conditions, confrontations between police and juveniles in public spaces become more unlikely in the suburbs. In the absence of "street corner" encounters typically associated with large cities, suburban cops may view traffic stops as the primary way to control juveniles who may threaten the orderly character of middle- and upper-middle-class suburbs (Baumgatner, 1988).

In addition to highlighting the prevalence of traffic related encounters, the current study also provides evidence to suggest that encounters between police and juveniles in nonurban places may be less problematic and "tension filled" than those described in previous research. Juveniles who were suspects or disputants were often subjected to some form of coercive authority (usually an interrogation and/or commands to cease some type of behavior). However, a majority of the observed encounters involved police actions that could be considered nonconfrontational and/or supportive (see Table 3). For example, 21% of the encounters involved officer requests for information, and juveniles were advised to seek additional help from other persons or social service agencies in 17% of the encounters. Juveniles were comforted or reassured in 16% of all the encounters. Taken together, the observed officers exhibited some type of supportive and/or nonconfrontational behavior in 62% of all the encounters.

These findings are most likely due to the inclusion of juveniles who encountered police as victims, service recipients, and witnesses. Previous research has almost exclusively focused

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on interactions between police and juveniles who are criminal suspects and/or disputants, a situation that has certainly contributed to the characterization of police–juvenile encounters as invariably difficult and stressful. The provision of support and/or assistance by police officers with juveniles has not been the subject of prior research with the exception of one study that employed SSO to study encounters between urban officers and juveniles who were suspects and/or disputants (Meyers, 2004). In this study, Meyers (2004) found that 25% of juvenile suspects received some type of police support or assistance from urban officers.

The provision of support or assistance by nonurban officers may also be indicative of a unique style of policing in nonurban places. A limited number of studies have addressed the work of officers employed by “smaller” agencies, especially those who work in small towns and rural places (Cain, 1971; Decker, 1979; Flanagan, 1985; Liederbach & Frank, 2003; Meagher, 1995; Weisheit et al., 1996). These studies suggest that there are some important differences between “big city” cops and officers who patrol nonurban jurisdictions. For example, rural and small-town officers appear to be distinguished in terms of the degree to which they perform service-related tasks and their tendency to encounter citizens on a casual, less formal basis. If this is the case, the nonconfrontational actions toward juveniles observed in the current study could be described as part of more general nonurban style of policing that is less legalistic and more informal than the style usually exhibited by urban police.

Limitations associated with the current study prevent easy conclusions regarding whether or not police–juvenile encounters in nonurban places differ significantly from those that occur in highly urbanized cities. The sample of communities included 15 suburban communities and five small towns, all of which are located within the greater Cincinnati, Ohio, area. The current study characterized these communities as “nonurban,” primarily because the study sites represent a departure from previous literature that has focused on big cities. There is a large degree of structural diversity among communities that are thought of as “suburban” however, and researchers interested in the study of rural places and small towns have yet to formulate precise definitions that clearly distinguish these types of jurisdictions. Findings from the current study are limited by the degree to which the sampled communities differ from other nonurban sites in terms of community structures and the wide variety of organizational arrangements typical of departments that are nonurban. There is an obvious need for more systematic data concerning the nature and character of police–juvenile interactions, and researchers interested in furthering this line of research should strive to include samples of police officers who patrol jurisdictions that adequately represent the varying dimensions of communities.

Notes

1. There is evidence that juvenile violence increased in the early 1990s; however, trends in the violent juvenile crime rate appear to have stabilized. Moreover, arrest trends among juveniles for property crimes overall have remained relatively stable over time. Juvenile arrests for certain types of crimes have been on the rise, including violent offenses, weapons, drugs, and curfew violations. It is unclear whether these trends are the result of changes in actual offending rates among juveniles or policy changes in the reaction to juvenile offending. Notwithstanding this debate, the majority of offenses committed by juveniles remain nonviolent, less serious offenses.

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2. Policing in a Community Context: An Observational Study of Suburban, Rural, and Urban Policing (Grant #98-IJ-0063) included 21 police agencies in the greater Cincinnati area. Data collected during observations of the Clermont County sheriff's office are not included in the current study.

3. A total of 43 observers participated in the project. All observers were affiliated with the University of Cincinnati either pursuing their PhD degree (27.9%), masters degree (41.8%), or undergraduate degrees (30.2%).

4. The observation schedules were constructed on a monthly basis. Agencies that used a standard 8-hr shift were randomly assigned ride dates and shift times to complete the goal of 2.5 observations per month. Agencies that did not employ a standard 8-hr shift were randomly scheduled for either one or two observations per month on a rotating basis to obtain the 8-hr shift equivalent of 2.5 shifts per month. The choice to randomly select shifts to be observed (rather than officers) was primarily driven by practical concerns. The observed agencies routinely employed only a few officers on patrol during any given shift, and these assignments were often made no more than 1 week in advance. Thus, observations were conducted with officers who were assigned to patrol on randomly selected dates and shifts, and the research team reviewed the observation data on an ongoing basis to ensure that a representative sample of officers were observed within each sampled agency.

5. Encounters often involve multiple citizens. Table 2 discusses encounters as a whole, rather than individual juveniles. There were a total of 195 encounters that involved juveniles between age 13 and 17 years. Tables 3 and 4 concern the cases of individual juveniles. The 195 police–juvenile encounters involved a total of 325 individual juveniles. Of these, 211 juveniles were the subject of "full" encounters, 92 juveniles were the subject of "brief" encounters, and 22 juveniles were the subject of "casual" encounters. Information in Tables 3 and 4 excludes those juveniles who were the subject of either "brief" or "casual" encounters with police.

6. The collapsed categories were primarily derived from those outlined by Mastrofski et al. (1998).

7. Observed officers often use multiple means of control during a single encounter. For example, a juvenile may initially be told to cease his or her behavior, and subsequently be interrogated and/or threatened with a criminal charge. Therefore, percentages regarding the use of various methods of control will not equal 100% within role categories.

8. The determination concerning whether or not a juvenile committed a criminal offense was made by the observer during the police–juvenile encounter. These determinations were based on whether or not the juvenile had committed a criminal act in the officer's presence and/or whether or not probable cause to believe the juvenile had committed a criminal offense existed based on the evidence known to the officer and/or observer. Traffic offenses are excluded from the data contained in Table 4.

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