The eruption of neighborhoods in Baltimore after the funeral of Freddie Gray in April 2015 vividly illustrated the anger and deep frustration people felt about their treatment by police within a larger context of systemic neglect. Gray’s death while in police custody occurred in a police department that has paid out more than $6 million in legal settlements for police misconduct since 2011 (Puentes and Donovan 2015). Encounters with police in the neighborhood while going about one’s daily routine are part of the everyday life of teenagers who live in predominantly African American and Latino low-income neighborhoods in cities. Moreover, the application of punitive control extends to the school, shaping the daily routines of youth in the key spaces where they spend their time.

Daily routines happen within a particular context, and as such they represent a pathway through which the effects of the neighborhood and the school environment may translate to the well-being of teens and affect the transition to adulthood. Although everyday routines are typically mentioned by researchers as one mechanism for how neighborhoods affect their residents, routines have not been studied as much as other conduits of neighborhood effects. Additionally, one of the criticisms levied at neighborhood effects research is that social scientists focus too exclusively on the neighborhood as a primary site of socialization for adolescents. We address these gaps in the literature by analyzing how youth in disadvantaged neighborhoods perceive their daily routines in relation to surveillance in two primary social contexts: schools and neighborhoods. The everyday routines of adolescents within their school and neighborhood contexts affect how they make sense of their world and “make complex decisions to survive in their local community” (Weisner 2002:6). As the death of Freddie Gray in Baltimore and many others illustrate, adjusting one’s daily routine to manage interactions with police can truly be a matter of survival, given that men of color are disproportionately likely to be victims of officer-involved shootings (Durán 2016; Durán and Loza 2017). Our research is situated in Baltimore, where one third of children and teens live in poverty (U.S. Census Bureau 2014). All of the individuals in our sample are African American and spent at least some of their childhood...
in Baltimore’s poorest neighborhoods, which are the hardest hit by violence and policing. We analyze how the frequent microaggressions to which they are exposed add additional stressors to their lives as they go about their everyday routines and can ultimately affect their transition to adulthood.

**Literature Review**

**Daily Routines and the Well-being of Young Adults**

Growing up in high-poverty neighborhoods can negatively affect children and teenagers. In studies spanning the past three decades, researchers have tied neighborhood disadvantage or disorder to a range of outcomes, including dropping out of high school (Aaronson 1997, 1998; Case and Katz 1991), teen childbearing (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Brooks-Gunn and Paikoff 1993; Crane 1991), cognitive skills (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997), and mental health, including depression and anxiety (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996; Attar, Guerra, and Tolan 1994; Browning et al. 2013; Latkin and Curry 2003). Social scientists have suggested several mechanisms through which neighborhoods may affect individuals, above and beyond family- and individual-level characteristics, including social ties, collective efficacy, institutional resources, and—our focus in this study—daily routines (Clampet-Lundquist et al. 2011; Harding 2010; Maimon and Geller 2014).

Suveillance by police on young people as they go about their daily routines can be stressful and can influence how they perceive their place in society. This is particularly the case in low-income neighborhoods that are predominantly African American or Latino, where there appears to be a seamless system of punitive control on the streets and in the schools (Rios 2011, 2017). Rios (2011) linked the social institutions that affect African American and Latino youth into a “youth control complex” that “is a ubiquitous system of criminalization molded by the synchronized, systematic punishment meted out by socializing and social control institutions” (p. 40). Acts of criminalization include police harassment, school suspensions, arrests, police surveillance, stigma, and racial microaggressions (Rios 2011).

Racial microaggressions can involve “hostile or overt racial incidents,” insults, and indignities (Torres-Harding, Andrade, and Diaz 2012:153). Microaggressions can occur in the schools when teens are punished for infractions ranging from minor to extreme, as they are going through security at the front door, and as their actions in the halls are closely monitored. In the neighborhood, microaggressions can range from a police request to move from a corner or a porch stoop to being patted down while against a wall or police car. These moments add up to the situation in which youth may anticipate that violence from police is “a possibility during any encounter” (Brunson 2007:88). If one is living in a neighborhood that has been targeted for aggressive policing, or attending a school with zero-tolerance policies, these encounters can happen on a daily basis, and their cumulative effect may not be limited to one’s attitudes about police but also extend to one’s mental health and perception of self (Rios 2011). Geller et al. (2014) found that young men in New York City who have more contact with police have more symptoms of trauma and anxiety. Microaggressions as well as more physically hostile acts can be harmful for one’s mental or physical health outcomes, especially when they occur as an integral part of one’s daily routine (Torres-Harding et al. 2012).

**Police and Neighborhoods**

In 2010, when we conducted our interview study, Baltimore’s homicide rate was in the top five in the United States, and its violent crime rate was in the top 10 for U.S. cities with more than 100,000 residents (McIntyre and Sauter 2011). Violent crime is not equally distributed across Baltimore’s neighborhoods, and as in other U.S. cities, it is concentrated in low-income neighborhoods, where many of the youth in our sample live. As one might expect, this is where law enforcement activity is concentrated (Justice Policy Institute 2015).

Police behavior varies on the basis of the neighborhoods in which they are operating, and this has been especially true during the war on drugs over the past three decades (Alexander 2010; Bass 2001). Researchers have found that police are more likely to use coercive authority and higher levels of force in neighborhoods that are more economically disadvantaged and predominantly communities of color (Smith 1986; Terrill and Reisig 2003). Many of these communities are in urban areas, although racialized policing occurs in the suburbs as well (Boyles 2015). Goffman’s (2014) ethnography of a low-income African American neighborhood in Philadelphia documents how the intense police presence infiltrates the everyday lives of the residents, affecting their social relations and their perspective of the police.

Researchers have documented racial differences in attitudes about police, with African Americans generally having less favorable attitudes toward police than whites (Hurst, Frank, and Browning 2000). In a survey of more than 900 young people (16–21 years old) in public places in New York City, more than half of Latinos and African Americans compared with one third of whites stated that they did not feel comfortable with police (Fine et al. 2003). Fine et al. (2003) pointed out that youth who live in neighborhoods with increased police presence endure microaggressions from police, storeowners, and others in authority. Additionally, there is a gender dynamic in interactions with police. In general, men are more likely to be stopped by the police than women, and African American men are more likely to believe they have been victims of racial profiling than African American women (Brunson and Miller 2006; Weitzer and Tuch 2002). Given the negative experiences many youth of
color have with police, and the propensity of officers to use higher levels of force in disadvantaged or predominantly neighborhoods of color, it should not be surprising that many young people do not believe the criminal justice system works to protect them (Anderson 1999; Gau and Brunson 2010; Patton 1998).

**Control in Schools**

In the 1980s, at the same time as the war on drugs was escalating on the streets in cities across the United States, schools began implementing “zero-tolerance” disciplinary policies that mirrored, in an uncanny way, what was happening on the streets and in the criminal justice system (Browne-Dianis 2011; Caton 2012; Hirschfield 2008). Although instilling obedience to authority, especially for working-class and poor children, is not a new phenomenon in public education, what is new is the criminalization of misbehaving in school (Hirschfield 2008). The underlying assumption for zero tolerance in the schools and on the streets was that youth were “super-predators” who needed to be dealt with swiftly and severely (DiIulio 1996). Increased police presence in schools, metal detectors at the entrance, and cameras in the hallways have made schools, particularly in cities, “look, sound, and act more like criminal justice institutions” (Caton 2012:1056; Bracy 2011; Hirschfield 2008). Researchers and advocates refer to this more punitive shift as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, and Leone 2012; Wald and Losen 2003).

Although there is no evidence that zero-tolerance policies improve school climate, and in fact they may harm academic performance, they have increased the likelihood that students will be arrested for their behavior at school (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008; Browne-Dianis 2011; Gonsoulin et al. 2012; Nolan 2011). As with arrests outside of school, racial disparities exist for the consequences of zero-tolerance practices, with the suspension rate of African American students three times higher than that of white students (Browne-Dianis 2011; Wald and Losen 2003). Scholars have documented how these policies create an atmosphere of criminalization at school, especially for young men of color (Ferguson 2000; Kupchik 2010; Kupchik and Ellis 2008; Rios 2011, 2017), though Morris (2016) detailed how African American girls are criminalized in schools.

**Navigating into Early Adulthood**

There is a fair amount of research on the transition to adulthood among middle-class youth, but we know less about the challenges faced by disadvantaged youth in the transition to adulthood (for exceptions see Bynner 2005; Osgood et al. 2005). As previous research on the transition to adulthood has found, there are large class differences in the resources youth possess as they move into the roles and responsibilities of adulthood, and these differential resources can affect the ability to successfully navigate stages in the transition to adulthood (Furstenberg 2008). Although individuals do have a level of agency in their own decisions and actions, the structural environment of youth’s lives, including their neighborhoods and schools, greatly affect the ability to successfully transition to adult roles and responsibilities (Furstenberg, Rumbaut, and Settersten 2005). Given that class inequalities have grown in recent years (Furstenberg 2010), it is increasingly important to recognize and analyze the factors that shape low-income youth’s transition to adulthood.

We argue that these inequalities are compounded by the challenges that exposure to microaggressions and violent interactions with police stemming from criminalization create in the lives of youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods. The transition to adulthood literature recognizes that there are unique challenges for “vulnerable populations,” defined as individuals with experience in the foster care, juvenile justice, criminal justice, and mental health systems; runaway and homeless youth; special education students; and youth with physical disabilities (Osgood et al. 2005). However, many of the youth in our study would not fit into any of these “vulnerable population” categories, not having formal interaction with these systems. Yet our respondents face unique obstacles to their successful transitions to adulthood due to stressful experiences in their neighborhoods and schools that are not captured in formal connections to the criminal justice system. Research shows that chronic exposure to stressful and sometimes violent experiences can result in inhibited decision making (Bloom 1997) and lack of future orientation (Garbarino 1995). This lack of future orientation involves diminished expectations for the future and can inhibit healthy transitions to adulthood (Garbarino 1995). We argue that youth who are consistently exposed to microaggressions and more violent interactions from the police in their neighborhoods and schools are negatively affected in their transition to adulthood in ways that have not been fully explored by previous research.

Thus, this study adds to the literature on transition to adulthood and neighborhood effects by analyzing the narratives of youth living in disadvantaged neighborhoods to understand the challenges they face because of interactions with police in their neighborhoods and schools. The impact of a criminal record on the transition to adulthood is well documented (Fader 2013; Kirk and Sampson 2013), but we add more nuance to this research by recognizing that interactions with police can affect youth’s daily routines, even if those interactions do not result in an arrest. We consider how these experiences are a mechanism of neighborhood effects that may inhibit youth’s transition to adulthood.

**Methods**

For this analysis we explored the question: how do young people in Baltimore experience criminalization in their
everyday routines in two key social settings, schools and neighborhoods? Our sample is from a qualitative study of young people in Baltimore whose families had participated in the Moving to Opportunity (MTO) demonstration in the mid-1990s. Families from five cities, including Baltimore, who were living in public housing signed up for MTO, and some were randomly assigned housing vouchers, which they could use to move out of public housing. Although the study was designed as a randomized experiment to study the effect of the voucher, we are analyzing the data outside of the experimental design in this work.

At the beginning of the study in 2010, we drew a random sample of 200 15- to 24-year-olds who had been interviewed in the MTO Final Impacts Evaluation in the previous year. We conducted in-depth, qualitative interviews with 150 individuals for a response rate of 75 percent from July to December 2010. The respondents were fairly evenly split between men and women. Most youth lived in neighborhoods that were moderately poor, as the average neighborhood poverty rate was 25 percent. Mirroring national trends, the young men were more likely to have been involved in illegal activities at some point than the young women, but in the sample as a whole, fewer than 1 in 5 had ever been involved in activities such as selling drugs or stealing cars.

These interviews lasted 1.5 to 3 hours, and they were recorded and later transcribed. Interviewers followed a semi-structured interview guide, which included modules about education, neighborhoods, friends, risk behaviors, and mental health. Most of the interviews took place in the respondents’ homes. Interviewers also wrote a set of field notes after each interview. The respondents’ names and school names have been changed to protect the identity of the respondents. We used the qualitative software program Atlas.ti to code the data and engaged in two rounds of coding for the analysis in this article. The first round of primary coding was mainly inductive, using a codebook that contained key codes derived from the questions in the interview. We then created coding reports for key codes related to our research questions. In this inductive stage of coding we read through each code, as well as overlapping codes, to explore salient themes that emerged from the data.

These data are from a relatively large sample for a qualitative study, but the generalizability of these findings has limitations. This is not a representative sample of youth in Baltimore or African American youth. Instead, it is a sample of young people who lived in extremely disadvantaged public housing developments at some point in their childhood and, on average, are still living in neighborhoods where one in every four people is poor. Despite these limitations, the detailed in-depth interview data allow us to identify processes at work that affect the daily routines of young people who live or have lived in high-poverty and high-crime neighborhoods.

Results

Criminalization of Daily Routines

The youth’s stories of violence they witnessed in their neighborhoods were plentiful. One third had seen someone shot, stabbed, severely beaten, or killed in the neighborhood. Youth experience negative mental health effects when they perceive their neighborhoods as dangerous (Aneshensel and Sucoff 1996), and consistent exposure to danger can create a state of “chronic hyperarousal” in youth (Bloom 1997). But where law enforcement might be seen as a solution to this violence, many of the youth we interviewed view the police as another element in the neighborhood that threatens their welfare (see also Coates 2015).

The potential for police interference is ubiquitous in many of the neighborhoods where the youth in our study have lived, regardless of whether they are involved in illegal activities. About two thirds of the young men in our sample discussed being interfered with by police in some manner, whether or not they were engaged in illegal activities. This contrasts with about one quarter of the young women in our sample. The role of police is ostensibly to increase public safety; however, it is relatively rare among the young people in our sample for safe to be a descriptor they use for police. This possibility of a hostile encounter has the potential to limit their daily routines, manage their presentation of self (Anderson 1999), and escalate to physical violence or an arrest. Thus, youth are in a situation of “double jeopardy”: they must maintain a state of alertness for not only community violence but also police interference. The price of this increased vigilance may be mental and physical outcomes of stress.

In high-crime urban neighborhoods, children and adolescents may restrict themselves or their parents may confine them to their homes to avoid stray bullets or unnecessary fights. Although the young people in our sample avoid places at certain times because of fear of violence, some of our respondents told us that they would prefer to stay inside or go to another neighborhood to avoid police interference. After describing an incident when the police continued to ask her to move from one spot to another in her West Baltimore neighborhood, 15-year-old Veronica explained, “I got to leave or keep moving from spot to spot to spot because the policeman is going to come and harass me. So I would rather stay in the house.” Brandon, a 20-year-old living in East Baltimore who stated, “It’s hard to be around here sometimes,” chooses to hang outside his neighborhood to avoid the constant police presence where he feels he is living under constant suspicion.

In any location, a young person may be stopped, questioned, and frisked in high-crime neighborhoods targeted by police. These locations include walking home from school or the store, hanging out on a corner, and sitting on one’s porch or stoop. Some told us about particular “rules” the
police created that limited how they moved about in their neighborhood. Daily routines were regulated by the police across types of neighborhoods. Sixteen-year-old Sam, who lives on the edge of West Baltimore and the suburbs, was told by police that he could not hang out on a certain corner because the corner was “indicted.” Marco, 22 years old, lives outside the city near the bay, and he told us that no one is allowed to walk around in groups of more than four people. Jaquan is a 22-year-old high school graduate who has lived most of his life in a public housing development before and after it was redeveloped. There are stricter rules in its newly developed state that govern who can be in the space and what people need to carry for identification. Forgetting his ID at home one day, Jaquan was arrested for trespassing while going to the store for his grandmother.

Several respondents recounted how even sitting on the porch or stoop of their house or the house of someone they knew could result in questioning by police. Terrell is a 20-year-old who lives in East Baltimore and works in security at Johns Hopkins University. When he wears his uniform, he feels a sense of protection from getting questioned. But he is not always in uniform, putting him in the same category of every other young African American man in his neighborhood. He described how the police stopped their car and questioned him and his friend as they were sitting on his friend’s front porch one day. As they drove off, Terrell made a comment to his friend, and the police officer stopped the car and got out, demanding that he tell him what he said:

[He] got back out the car and came over and jacked me up. And he said, “What’d he say to me?” . . . I’m like, “I ain’t say nothing.” He was like, “Oh, I thought so,” and he called me a b-i-t-c-h and he pushed me on the ground.

When the interviewer asked him if he tried to do anything about it, Terrell said, resignedly, “I guess I just brushed it off and moved on. . . . It made me angry, but I couldn’t, I couldn’t do nothing.” These microaggressions for which there is no outlet may accumulate within young people and produce negative health outcomes (see Geller et al. 2014). Similar to Terrell, Taniya felt exasperated and confused when she was stopped and searched by the police after helping her cousin’s mother bring groceries into her house, located in a public housing development. As they entered the house, Taniya noticed people selling drugs around the corner and a dice game nearby. She also saw a white police officer watching everything going on, who then approached Taniya and her friends and accused them of selling drugs and questioned them. Taniya felt frustrated because a basic act of helping someone out with their groceries had evolved into an incident in which they were under suspicion. Taniya, a college student, argued that she should not have to deal with this type of questioning: “Why do you just wanna randomly harass some random black females? . . . I’m going to school, I’m minding my business.”

Having a wealth of personal experiences and shared knowledge from others, some young people in our sample understand that there are certain props that they can use in relating to police officers that will hopefully encourage the police to treat them differently (Goffman 1959). At the same time, as other researchers have noted (Anderson 1999; Jones 2009), young people in high-crime neighborhoods also have to navigate their neighborhoods in such a way to protect themselves from encounters with nonpolice that could turn violent. Essentially, young people may be expending a significant amount of mental resources to manage their presentation of self to others in the neighborhood and to police, so as to avoid threats from both sources. This negotiation is particularly critical for young men, because they are more often the target of violence and police. Although they may dress a certain way to fit in with their peers, a style of dress can be a marker to police that they are worthy of being stopped and frisked.

Kevin told us that undercover cops figure, “just because you all look like drug dealers, you all going to get treated like drug dealers.” In this case, props can come in handy for protection against the police. Nineteen-year-old Cody has the perfect “get out of jail free” card. A member of the Police Explorers, when he has been stopped by police—which happens “all the time,” according to him—he pulls out his badge and they say, “Oh, you’re a Police Explorer, sorry, keep going.” Cody told us that he always wears this badge around his neck whenever he goes outside in his East Baltimore neighborhood for this reason. Gary does not have a Police Explorer badge, but he wields his work identification card in such a way that makes the police officers aware that he is wearing his uniform or if he has his uniform hat in the car and they say, “Oh, you’re a Police Explorer, sorry, keep going.”

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then out of Maryland to a different state. He works as a security guard at a hotel, and his story illustrates how power and humiliation can be a part of the police-youth encounter. Police officers regularly stop him as he is driving and ask to search his car. He told us that he was recently pulled over for not making a complete stop several blocks previously. The police officer gave him a hefty ticket, and when Isaac protested this, the police officer hauled him out of the car and cuffed him, saying “That’s it, you want to go to jail today?” He stayed outside handcuffed against his car for about an hour and a half while the officer harangued him about getting “smart” with him.

Jayden, 22 years old, stated that he can get stopped and questioned two to three times a day. Police regularly test him or friends on the address of the house they’re sitting in front of. He was sitting on a front porch of a friend one day, watching someone get arrested, when the officer noticed him watching and came over and challenged him, ultimately ending up in a physical confrontation: “He [the officer] say, ‘Move away from this, you can’t watch this.’ So we up and move, he like, ‘Sit down.’ What is it—move and sit down? What’s going on?” Jayden’s mother came out to intervene and asked Jayden to come inside. When Jayden moved to follow her in, the officer grabbed him, escalating the encounter from a verbal to a physical one. These incidents of escalation are all too common in our respondents’ lives, either getting roughed up by the police, or having a friend or family member who has been in this situation.

Twenty-year-old Kareem explained that when he was younger, he thought of the police as “superheroes” who kept him and his family safe, and he wanted to become a police officer himself when he grew up. However, he witnessed the police beating up his brother, and he described how that incident dramatically changed his perception of the police:

When I was younger I was into the good guy . . . I was into cartoons and stuff like that so superheroes are like perfect. They are everything that you want to be and when I was younger, that’s what police officers was. . . . They patrollin’ the neighborhood, they’re making sure people don’t hurt me and my family. And when I turned about 10 or 11 I watched the knockers [undercover police] . . . beat my brother like, badly, and it was like eww. That’s what kind of person y’all really are?

Although police presence may be heightened in neighborhoods with high crime, only a handful of the youth reported feeling safer because of police presence; thus the police did not reduce the anxiety the youth might have felt given the level of neighborhood crime and disorder. In fact, several respondents in our sample had witnessed police offers engaged in crime, either colluding with drug dealers or, more commonly, planting drugs on individuals in order to have a reason to arrest them. According to our sample, this type of behavior is particularly the case with “knockers,” the nickname for undercover police in the narcotics squad. Most of the youth pointed out that knockers were more likely to use violence, more likely to plant drugs, and more likely to take money from individuals than uniformed police. Twenty-year-old Sadie was disgusted by the behavior of knockers in her East Baltimore neighborhood. She told us,

They just disrespectful. I just don’t like the knockers at all. . . . Like they’ll see us sitting on the step, “Oh you all need to f’in move, we don’t want you all sitting right here, and if you don’t we’re gonna be coming the f back around this corner.”

Our respondents claimed that the police presence influences how they use the space in their neighborhoods. The constant questioning around where the youth can sit or stand in their neighborhoods (including in front of their own homes), and the aggressiveness of the police serves as an additional layer of threats to negotiate. The identity management and vigilance that one must maintain to protect oneself from neighborhood threats, including the police, takes a toll on youth as they navigate their daily lives.

School as an Extension of the Streets

School is not a retreat from the streets; instead, there is often significant overlap and even escalation between these two environments. Many Baltimore public schools have metal detectors and a solid presence of school police, which are a separate police force from the Baltimore city police. Youth talked about their interactions with police in the neighborhood with more frequency than in the school context, yet their stories about school security emphasize the ways that their daily lives are affected by these interactions with police in multiple contexts.

One example of the overlap between interactions with police in neighborhoods and schools is the experience of walking through neighborhoods to get to and from school, an essential component of youth’s daily routine. This is a vulnerable time for students, many of whom have to walk through neighborhoods where they do not live to get to the schools they attend. Jacob is a 21-year-old who recalled walking home from school one day and being confronted by a police officer who thought he was someone else:

One day a police officer mistaken me for somebody that was walkin’ around here with a gun. . . . I had the same thing that they had on so they thought, you know, that kind of made me feel like—it hurt me and I felt disrespected. . . . But that’s what the neighborhood’s like, “Oh, well, we thought you was, you know, somebody else, we just seen somebody else around here that had the same thing you had on, he had a gun on him.”

Other students discussed the ways that their school hallways felt like the street, and that their experiences with police in the school were similar to their interactions on the street. Ray, 23 years old, explained an incident that occurred.
when he was in high school at Parker. He was shooting dice in the hallway when the school police broke it up. Ray described the police as carrying guns and chasing him, so he ran from the police, climbed a wall to try to get away from them, and eventually got caught. He was searched on the spot, and because he had dice and marijuana in his pocket he was taken into the police station and charged. Ray was then expelled from school.

Many respondents told us about the level of control their schools exerted by using search and surveillance, and fostering an overall feeling of criminalization in the school. This included frequent random police-dog searches in students' lockers, as well as police searches within the classrooms. Annmarie’s school increased security when she was in 11th grade after students began pulling fire alarms in the school. She explained that the security guards started searching students and escalated their interventions with students. As an example, she told us of an incident in which someone pulled a fire alarm at school and everyone went outside. Some students started fighting, and, in response, the security guards sprayed mace at the students.

Seventeen-year-old Jonathan believed the police who monitored Warner High were on a mission to get students suspended. One example of police escalation occurred when a police officer ultimately stepped over the line by breaking a student's arm behind his back. Jonathan depicted the cloud of criminalization he perceived at his school: “You come in there like real late, don’t have a real excuse they’ll try to get you suspended for that. Everything.”

Many of these incidents resulted in police escalating the situation, and getting suspended or expelled from school was a fairly common result of these interactions. Veronica was suspended for seven days for cursing in the classroom after a student threw an eraser at her. When she told us about the incident, she expressed frustration about the “favoritism” displayed by the teachers and staff members that ended up placing students into one of two categories: “it seems that the kids that do good. . . . It seem like they favor those kids the most. But the kids who are usually known for trouble; they don’t even give them a chance. They just see a different person.” Veronica’s story is similar to Zachary’s in power of labeling: once a student is labeled as a troublemaker, he or she is treated as such. Zachary is 17 years old and felt targeted at his middle school as someone the school police had to keep an eye on, and when he went to high school his name was transferred to the school as a problem student. He explains, “I’m ready to leave the school, because it’s too much drama. It’s the police messing with me now. . . . I’m a target at the school, and, like, they always on my back.” Zachary told the interviewer that he avoids going to school some days because he’s afraid that, with the criminalized spotlight on him, he’ll go to jail. Avoiding school is clearly not beneficial for Zachary’s education, nor is the rampant use of suspension, which keeps kids out of the learning environment. Several of the young people in our sample were suspended or expelled, sometimes for long periods of time. The tools of suspensions and expulsions disrupt learning, and make it more difficult to get acclimated in a new school where the cycle may begin again.

Although there is a need for security in schools, the youth’s experiences illustrate many of the ways that police and security guards in school create an environment of criminalization, and escalate situations in ways that are detrimental to students and the learning environment. Their stories indicate that they are viewed as threats in their schools, as the schools “gear up” with metal detectors, security personnel, dogs, and mace to patrol the interiors and immediate exteriors of the schools. Essentially, they are treated as “criminal risks” (Rios 2011:73).

Summary of the Impact of Criminalization

In their descriptions of police mistreatment in their neighborhoods and schools, respondents discuss the enduring impact of these episodes on multiple levels. First, it is important to emphasize that our respondents experienced both microaggressions and violence in their interactions with police. Thus, the experience of the encounter itself can be traumatic: witnessing others getting beaten up or experiencing brutality themselves. Second, respondents often develop a sense of mistrust of individual police officers, given these interactions and what they hear about from others. Third, reflecting legal cynicism, some respondents explain that they do not trust the criminal justice system as a whole, given that they perceive police often receive no punishment or experience no repercussions for engaging in unnecessary brutality (for similar findings see Kirk and Papachristos 2011; Sampson and Bartusch 1998).

Discussion

Similar to studies from Rios (2011, 2017) and others, our research documents how youth growing up in disadvantaged neighborhoods face criminalization of their daily routines across social settings, but particularly in two key domains: their neighborhoods and their schools. Although past research has explored police and school authority surveillance and interference with African American and Latino youth, most of this research has focused on youth who have been involved in illegal activities and who are formally connected to the criminal justice system. Our research includes a broad range of young men and women who share disadvantaged origins but have followed diverse trajectories into early adulthood. Thus, this analysis adds to our understanding of how daily routines include the activities, perceptions, and perhaps individual outcomes of youth who have grown up in poor neighborhoods. The experiences and impact of microaggressions and more severe violent behavior by police in their neighborhoods and schools are keenly felt among youth whether or not they are formally connected to the criminal justice system. Adjusting
their daily routines to navigate this criminalization is thus another aspect of the effects of neighborhoods on youths’ transition to adulthood, and one which previous research has not fully explored. Additionally, our data show that about two thirds of the young men in our sample discussed being interfered with by the police in some manner, and about one quarter of the young women in our sample reported police interference. Previous research and current media discussions of police brutality typically focus on the experiences of men. Although we do find that the men in our sample had more negative interactions with the police than the women, this is by no means an issue only among men. The young women in our sample also experienced microaggressions and violence in their interactions with police, and we miss a crucial component of the impact of criminalization in neighborhoods and schools if we only analyze men’s experiences.

On average, the young people in our sample are living in predominantly African American neighborhoods with more than 25 percent of residents living below the poverty line. According to previous research, these are exactly the type of neighborhoods in which police officers may use more coercive authority and physical force. Similar to what other studies have found, the stories from the interview narratives reveal that young African Americans who have spent some of their childhood in disadvantaged neighborhoods often have intimate experiences with being targets of criminalization. In this study, we analyze this dynamic in two contexts: respondents’ daily interactions with police officers in their neighborhoods and in their schools. Our findings offer insight into how daily routines for low-income young African Americans are shaped by a punitive culture of formal social control which can act as a chronic stressor and negatively affect the transition to adulthood.

This constant surveillance and threatening behavior by the police, whether or not a person is engaged in criminal activity, causes some people to modify their daily routines, creates additional management of how one presents oneself, and may generate a feeling of helplessness when one’s activities are continually questioned. These dynamics play out in the schools as well. Just as violence in the neighborhood can also be carried into the schools, so too are neighborhood policing practices duplicated in the schools. Youth in our sample report a vast array of security measures, a heavy presence of security officials, and strict consequences, including arrests and use of mace.

Many of our respondents’ stories include details about neighborhood and school violence in which one can understand why police and other forms of security are needed to keep youth safe. On the other hand, these security measures are not dealing with the root issues of crime and violence in these disadvantaged neighborhoods and may be escalating these problems by criminalizing youth and making schools more akin to the street. The themes from our data suggest that these tactics also need to be challenged because of the potential ongoing stressful effect on young people, regardless of their involvement in illegal behavior. Being labeled a troublemaker and therefore marked as a target in one’s neighborhood or at one’s school influences how youth go about their everyday routines and can act as a chronic stressor in youth people’s lives. This dynamic serves as another mechanism of neighborhood effects and may affect youths’ transition to adulthood.

There are alternative ways of keeping youth safe in their schools and neighborhoods. Focusing more on evidence-based practices that build trust can reduce the hypercriminalization of young people of color and work toward the development of communities that foster the transition to adulthood (for discussions of these practices, see Calhoun and Pelech 2010; Gill et al. 2014; Kupchik 2016; New York Civil Liberties Union 2007) and ultimately may address the outrage expressed by people in Baltimore and elsewhere in the wake of deaths at the hands of police. Our research suggests that efforts to reduce hypercriminalization of young people of color in poor communities must extend beyond macro-level policy change and take seriously the micro-level interactions that take place between police and youth in both neighborhood and school contexts.

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Author Biographies

Melody L. Boyd is an associate professor of sociology at The College at Brockport, State University of New York. She studies urban poverty, neighborhoods, housing policy, and families.

Susan Clampet-Lundquist is an associate professor of sociology at Saint Joseph’s University. Her research focuses on urban neighborhoods, families, adolescent risk behavior, and social policy.