Policing the Mundane:
How White Space Heightens Racial Disparities in Arrest Rates for Minor Offences, 1980 to 2015

Junia Howell
University of Pittsburgh

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POLICING THE MUNDANE: HOW WHITE SPACE HEIGHTENS RACIAL DISPARITIES IN ARREST RATES FOR MINOR OFFENCES, 1980 TO 2015

In April 2018, two Black men were arrested in a Philadelphia Starbucks as they waited for a friend. Caught on camera, their interactions with police and the nearby customers highlighted how their only crime was being Black in a predominately White space. The video quickly spread across social and news media inciting boycotts. Although the outrage was justifiable, the protest and proposed action steps overlooked the ubiquity of Black arrest and the larger structural causes of this inequity. In fact, within 16 weeks of this incident the police were called on Black residents doing a wide variety of actions including: a graduate student sleeping in her own dorm lounge, an eight year old selling water, a family barbequing in the park, a politician canvassing her district, golfers progressing too slowly, a family using their neighborhood pool, teenagers shopping for prom dresses, customers using coupons at CVS and the Dollar Store, two men working out at their own gym, a tourist staying in an AirBnB, a real estate agent entering a house he was selling, Subway customers using the restaurant bathroom, a firefighter conduct a routine inspection, and a twelve year old mowing a lawn.[1] These incidents are only the most recent in a long history of Black bodies being policed for being out of place (Combs 2016).

Scholars have long noted the role of police in regulating the movement, behavior, and rights of Black residents (Du Bois 1899; Du Bois 1935; Beckett and Western 2001; Pettit and Western 2004; Bobo and Thompson 2006; Alexander 2010; Bobo and Thompson 2010; Rios 2011; Wacquant 2012; Miller 2013; Van Cleve 2016; Rothstein 2017). In recent years, this research has highlighted how drug policies, the lack of employment and educational opportunities, and the criminalization of school discipline have led to the hyper-incarceration of the Black population (Alexander 2010; Bobo and Thompson 2010; Miller 2013; Ewert, Sykes and Pettit 2014; Van Cleve 2016). Specifically, scholars have noted racial residential segregation has enabled police forces to have differential enforcement policies leading to unequal arrest patterns (Bourgois 2002; Ousey and Lee 2008; Alexander 2010; Rios 2011). However, little work has empirically examined the correlation between residential segregation and racial disparities in arrest rates nor how this relationship has changed over time.

The present research begins to fill this gap by investigating to what extent White space and policing policies influence racially disparate arrest rates across U.S. metropolitan areas from 1980 to 2015. To this end, I linked the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Uniform Crime Reporting Program annual data (1980 to 2015), metropolitan level demographic data from the U.S. Bureau 1980, 1990, and 2000 Decennial Census as well as the 2006-2010 and 2011-2015 American Community Survey, and the 1987, 1990, 1993, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2007, and 2013 Law Enforcement Management and Administrative Statistics. This data enables me to explore trends across time and between cities to illuminate the role that White space has on divergent policing practices.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

In this analysis, I focus on arrest made for minor nonviolent offenses. These offenses include: vandalism, vagrancy, curfew, loitering, suspicion, runaways, disorderly conduct, gambling (including

[1] News stories reporting on these incidents can be found at the following hyperlinks: student sleeping, selling water, barbequing, politician canvassing, golfers, swimming, prom shopping, using coupons at CVS and Dollar Store, working out, AirBnB guest, real estate agent, Subway customers, firefighter, and lawn mowing.

bookmaking), prostitution, commercialized vice, drunkenness, violating liquor laws, driving under the influence, weapon possession, and other non-traffic nonviolent offenses. Although other arrest rates—like those for drug charges—are also important, I focus here on minor nonviolent offenses as they enable us to illuminate the influence of differential policing policies even for least consequential violations.

Examining arrest rates for just these minor offenses, I find from 1980 to 2015 Blacks are unsurprisingly more likely to get arrested than Whites. Yet, what is notable is despite a dip in inequity between the Black and White arrest rates during the late 1900s and early 2000s, this inequality begun to grow in the late 2000s reaching its highest level in 2015 (see Figure 1). In fact, in the most recent years the Black arrest rate has increased while the White arrest rate has declined. This general historical trend confirms what previous research has asserted about the influence of the War on Drug and policing policies on Black arrest rates—even for minor nonviolent non-drug related offences. However, this graph also illuminates inequality between Black and White arrest is far from over.

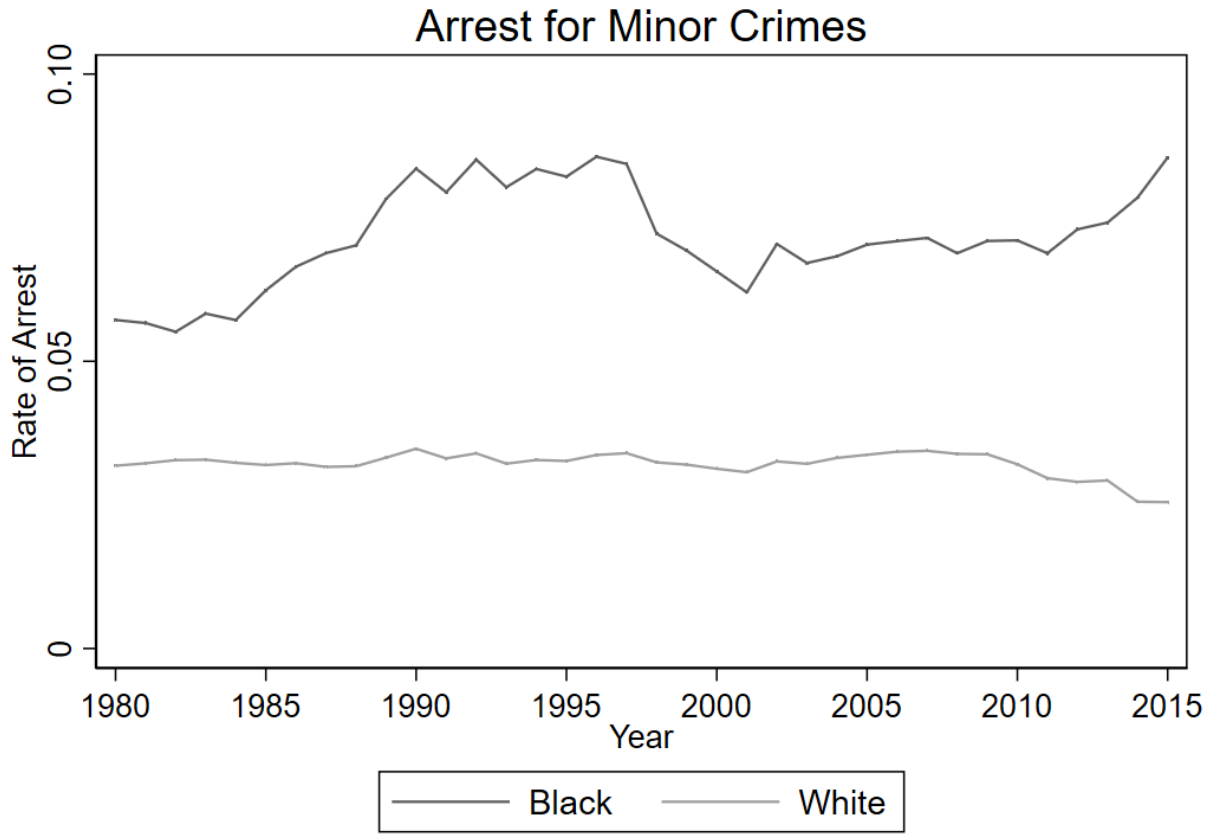

Figure 1. Average Black and White Arrest Rates For Minor Offenses by Year for All U.S. Metropolitan Areas

To understand this most recent trend and to investigate whether racial inequity in arrest rates is correlated with racial residential segregation, I explore how these trends differ across various metropolitan areas. To start, I use two metropolitan areas from each region in the country. As pictured in Figure 2, all eight of these cities have different arrest rates and trends over time. In fact,

not all of these cities have seen a recent uptick in arrest in the most recent years. New York, Rochester, Chicago, Kansas City, Dallas, and Los Angeles have all seen decreases in inequality while Little Rock and Salt Lake have seen notable increases.

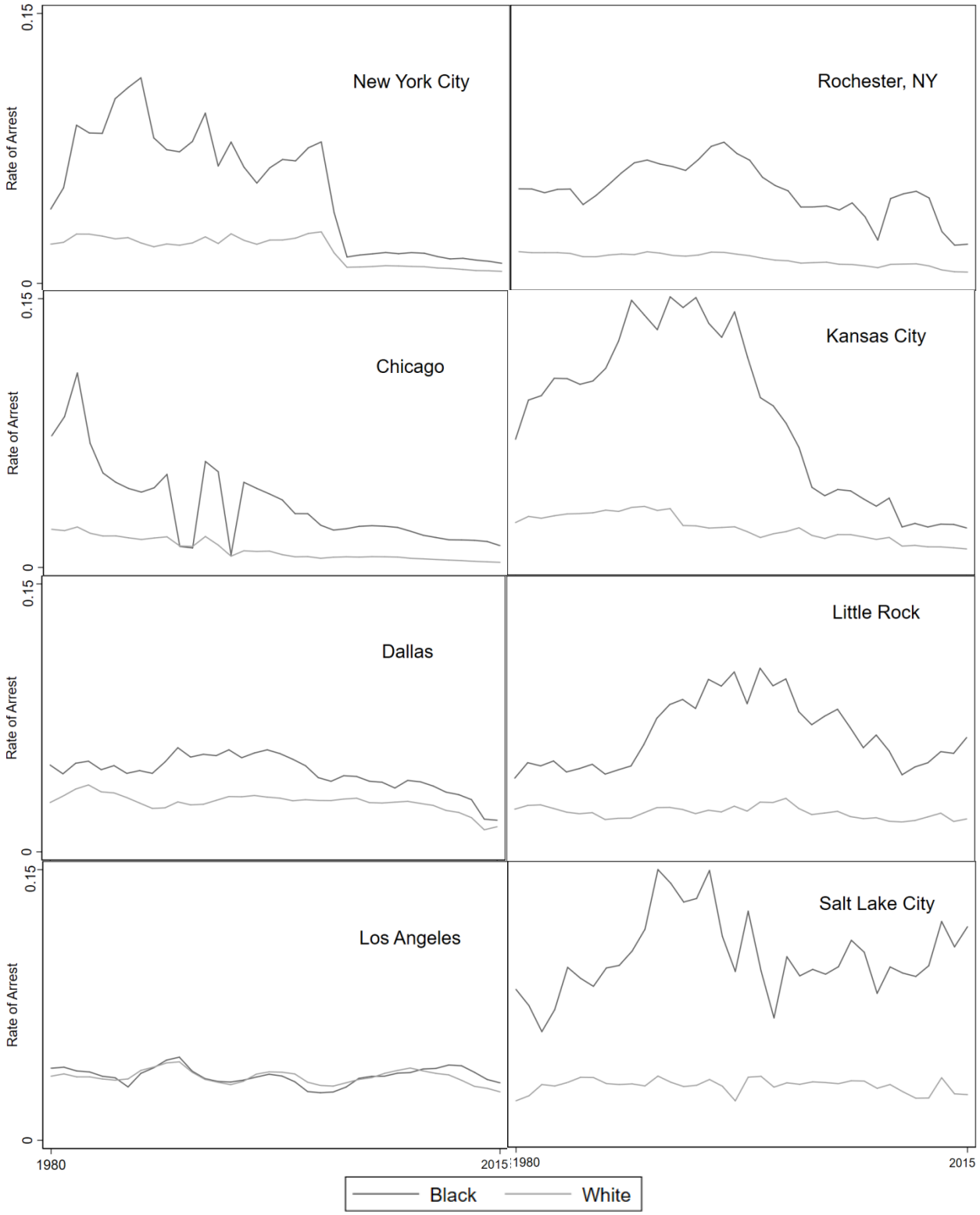

Figure 2. Black and White Minor Offences Arrest Rates By Year

Figure 3. Average Black Minor Offence Arrest Rates, 1980 to 2015

Scaling outward, Figure 3 depicts the average Black arrest rates across the metropolitan areas with at least 19 years of data.[2] This map demonstrates Black arrest rates are not evenly spread across the country and high Black arrest rates are not concentrated in large cities as one might presume. This is further confirmed by Figure 4 which graphs the inequality between Black and White arrest rates across Black arrest rates. Generally speaking, as the Black arrest rate increases so does the inequality between White and Black arrest rates. This relationship is epitomized by Salt Lake City which has the highest Black arrest rate and the highest inequality between White and Black arrest rates. Furthermore, as seen in Figure 2, Salt Lake's inequality is on the rise. Kansas City, Milwaukee, Denver and Las Vegas also have relatively high inequalities and Black arrest rates. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Philadelphia, Riverside, Los Angeles, and San Antonio have low inequality between their White and Black arrest rates.

Together these descriptive parameters not only demonstrate Blacks are arrested for minor offenses at higher rates than Whites but this inequality is growing over time and is not equally distributed across U.S. metropolitan areas. Furthermore, these descriptive graphs illuminate these observed inequalities are higher in metropolitan areas with higher White proportions. This relationship suggests that as Combs (2006) has hypothesized Black arrest rates are higher in places where they are seen as "out of place." To further adjudicate this possibility, I turn to a longitudinal hybrid-effects model.

Examining the difference in Black and White minor arrest rates, the first model examines differences between metropolitan areas. As seen in Table 1, the higher the metropolitan area's White proportion the higher the inequality between Black and White arrest rates. This finding suggests majority White metropolitan areas adopt policing practices that disproportionately scrutinize Black residents. Similarly, White segregation is positively correlated Black-White inequality in arrest rates. In other words, even in areas with comparable White proportions, when the White population is highly concentrated in a few neighborhoods Blacks are arrested at higher rates than Whites.

[2] Florida stopped reporting their data to the FBI in the 1990s. Thus, metropolitan areas in this state have incomplete data. I elect to exclude these areas from the analysis to ensure their missing years do not influence the observed relationships.

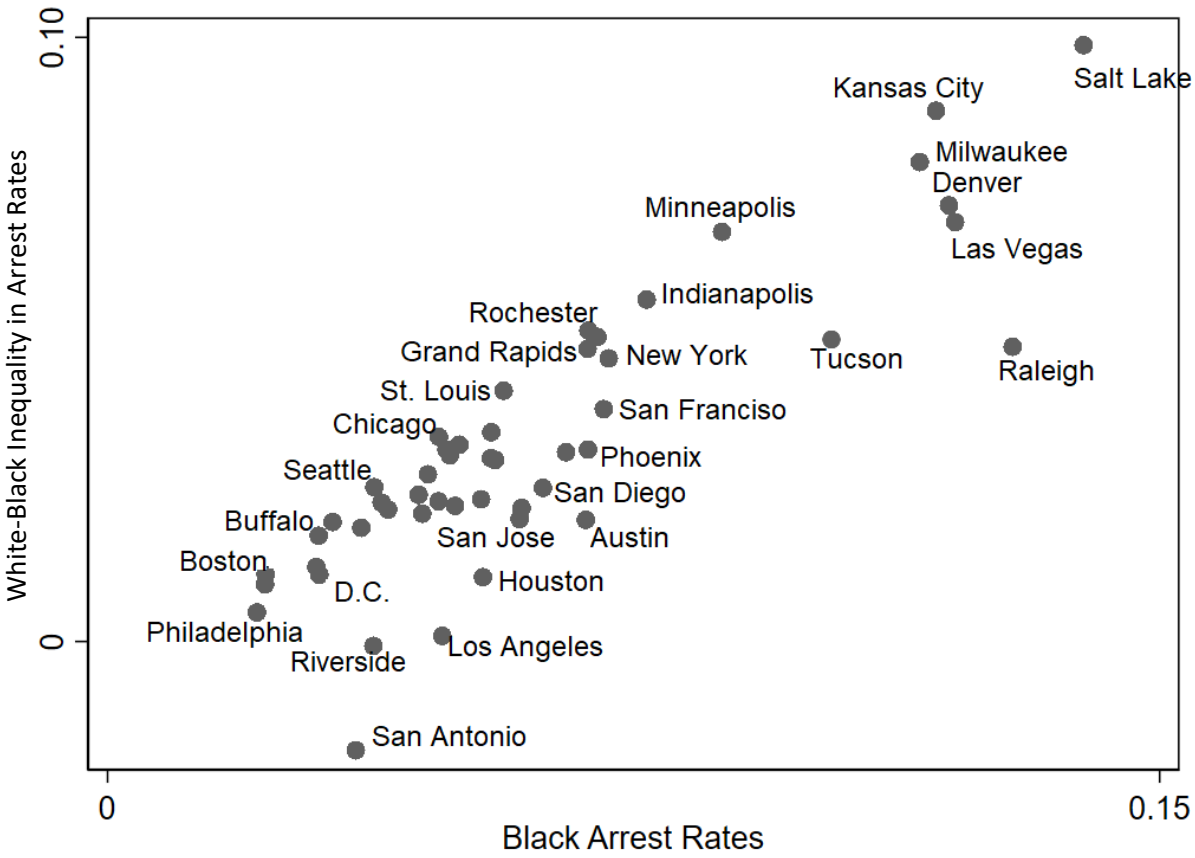

Figure 4. Inequality between Average Black and White Arrest Rates by Black Arrest Rates for U.S. Metropolitan Areas with At Least One Million Residents

Conversely, larger cities have less inequality between Black and White arrest rates. However, the smaller standardized coefficient suggests the effect of total population is not as poignant as White proportions or White segregation. Similarly, median income and region has some effect but not as much as residential segregation. Finally, this model demonstrates holding demographic factors constant, inequality in arrest rates over all is increasing over time.

To further illuminate which of these patterns have to do with unobserved differences between the metropolitan areas and changes in the demographics themselves, Model 2 adds within (also known as fixed) effects. Like the between effects, the within effects show that as the White proportion and segregation increases over time so does arrest rate inequality. Conversely, as the population of the metropolitan area grows this inequality decreases. In other words, the influence of White space is not merely due to unobserved factors. Finally, Model 3 examines whether the relationship between White proportion and year has strengthened over time. Findings suggest this relationship has strength both between and within metropolitan areas. In other words, White proportion is a greater driver of racial disparities in arrest in 2015 than it was in 1980.

Table 1. Coefficients from Longitudinal Hybrid Effects Models Predicting Differential Arrest Rates, Interval to Interval, 1980-2015.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Between Effects			
White Proportion	0.84 (0.12)	0.84 (0.12)	0.84 (0.12)
White Segregation	0.38 (0.10)	0.38 (0.10)	0.38 (0.10)
Total Population, logged	-0.16 (0.05)	-0.16 (0.05)	-0.16 (0.05)
Median Income	0.17 (0.04)	0.17 (0.04)	0.17 (0.04)
Within Effects			
White Proportion		0.26 (0.02)	0.23 (0.02)
White Segregation		0.07 (0.01)	0.07 (0.01)
Total Population, logged		-0.06 (0.01)	-0.06 (0.01)
Median Income		0.04 (0.01)	0.03 (0.01)
Interactions			
Between White Proportion*Year			0.05 (0.01)
Within White Proportion*Year			0.02 (0.01)
Region			
Midwest	0.34 (0.11)	0.34 (0.11)	0.33 (0.11)
South	0.21 (0.11)	0.21 (0.11)	0.21 (0.11)
West	0.51 (0.12)	0.51 (0.12)	0.52 (0.12)
Year	0.05 (0.01)	0.05 (0.01)	0.26 (0.01)
Constant	-0.22 (0.10)	-0.22 (0.10)	-0.21 (0.10)
Within R^2		0.0480	0.0520
Between R^2	0.3964	0.3954	0.3931
N of Metros	351	351	351

In addition to these demographic factors, I am working on linking information on policing policies (e.g. community policing programs) and police racial demographics to further illuminate the factors contributing to the observed inequality. As I continue to conduct analyses for this paper in advance of the annual PAA meeting in Austin, I will further refine these findings as well as their implications for understanding racial inequality generally. For now, though, I hope that I have provided sufficient demonstration of the power of this analytical examination of the relationship between residential segregation and racial disparities in arrest rates. Although this relationship has long been theorized in the literature, it has not been empirically examined. This empirical support adds credence to our theoretical understandings of these processes and helps contextualize the recent arrests.

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