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POL378 Mass Incarceration

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Saving Face in the Carceral State: The Changing Forces and Faces of Policing in Wealthy versus RCS Communities

Imagine, for a moment, that you are driving through the East Bay Area of Northern California. Today, the East Bay Area is a diverse, increasingly-affluent area, having experienced major growth in the wake of the tech boom. As you drive, you likely spot any number of advertisements for the innovation of the moment. But, like any good driver in California, you are also probably keeping an eye out for the police.

What does policing look like in the East Bay Area? If you're in Fremont, California, the second-most populous city in the region, the answer is: nothing you're too likely to encounter, in your day to day life. You might see a patrol car occasionally, especially as you come off of the highway; the FPD gets a good portion of its work issuing traffic citations, after all, logging 1637 citations and 2122 warnings in 2025.[1] For comparison, the FPD made 2,084 total arrests in the same year. If you're lucky, the patrol car you spot might even be the Tesla Model S or Model Y, which were added to the fleet in 2019 and 2021 respectively.[2] In fact, a significant portion of the FPD's fleet is now made up of either electric or hybrid vehicles, in the name of the city's 2045 goal for carbon neutrality.

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[1]FPD Annual Report, 2025

[2]Fremont Police Department, Tesla Media Kit 2022

Overhead, you might occasionally see a drone. Only employing 184 sworn officers for a population of over 228,000, the Fremont Police Department now often opts to dispatch drones prior to officer deployment, hoping to "enhance safety within our community, improve incident response times, increase officer/firefighter safety, increase de-escalation outcomes, and become a force multiplier to public safety with increased actionable intelligence."[3] While the *"Speed Enforced by Aircraft"* signs dotting the freeway may not necessarily refer to them, FPD drones are a more likely sight in the sky these days than the California Highway Patrol planes to which they once referred– in fact, FPD drones were deployed 1,089 times in 2025 alone.[4]

This is not to say that there's no chance that you might encounter an officer. In fact, the Fremont Police Department remains notably well-staffed, as one of the highest paid police departments in the nation– officers earn $10,236.62 per month while in the academy and $11,260.27 after graduation, making for a starting annual salary of $135,123.24.[5] If you are to encounter an officer, chances are that the interaction will end peacefully; after all, the Use of Force (UOF) rate is less than 1% and no officer-involved shootings occurred in 2025.[6] In Fremont, the police are at *best* a sign of a successful community and at *worst* a traffic-ticket nuisance.

If you continue driving up I-880, that image of policing will start to change.

Twenty miles up the road, Oakland is the next major city after Fremont. While still in Alameda County and sharing a sheriffs' jurisdiction, Oakland is far denser in population and higher in crime: there were 27,435 crimes reported in 2025, with 4,870 of them being violent

[3] Fremont Police Department, 2026
[4] FPD Annual Report 2025
[5] Fremont Police Department, Job Site
[6] FPD Annual Report 2025

crimes.[7] In the same year, the Oakland Police Department (OPD) employed 678 sworn officers– about 1 officer per 654 citizens.[8]

Beyond its officers, though, the city of Oakland has found new ways to keep an eye on its constituents. See, as you entered the city, your license plate was scanned by a camera owned by a company called Flock Safety. Despite continued budget shortfalls, the City of Oakland signed a $2.5 million deal with Flock near the end of 2025, leading to the installation of 293 Automatic License Plate Readers (ALPRs) across town.[9] Your license plate has now been added to a database that is accessible to anyone with access to Flock's operating system and will remain there for 30 days– no warrant needed. If, for any reason, you become the subject of law enforcement scrutiny, your car's movement will be traceable so long as it is within the view of any one of the camera systems used by over 5000 police organizations and 1000 business, making you subject to what is functionally the most widely-integrated mass-surveillance system of the modern era.[10] One might call it a low-trust city: you are actively placed under surveillance before ever committing a crime, and you are only a visitor.

As distrusting of you as the Oakland Police Department is, the relationship goes both ways for many of the city's residents. Accountability and transparency have been lacking, after all, with the Oakland Police Department having not produced an Annual Report since 2022 and today failing to meet minimal California Public Records Act standards of compliance.[11] Use of force data, for instance, is available only as a spreadsheet of raw incident data for the year and does not indicate if there were subsequent professional standards complaints filed. Based on the available data, however, there were 4,279 reports of UOF incidents in 2025, with 6 resulting in

[7] OPD End of Year Crime Report, 2025
[8] City of Oakland Operating Budget FY 2025, U.S. Census Bureau City of Oakland
[9] City of Oakland Resolution 26-0294
[10] Flock Safety Product Hub
[11] City of Oakland Annual Reports; see absence of reports after 2022. Reports in Box labeled "2023" onward are empty.

death.[12] Given the 18,573 reported stops and dispatches, that would yield an unprecedented 23.04% UOF rate.[13]

Oakland's police department also carries a heavier reputation than Fremont's. After all, the city's police department has been under federal oversight for a record 23 years as a crucial part of the city's 2003 settlement in the landmark civil rights case of *Allen v. City of Oakland*, which came after four veteran police officers were accused by 119 plaintiffs of actions including kidnapping, beating, and planting evidence on victims with the city's knowledge.[14] However, federal oversight tangibly amounts to an independent commission of seven civilians who struggle with the same financial limitations as the broader expanse of Oakland's city government, thus little progress has been made on departmental reform.[15] In fact, multiple other significant civil rights cases have arisen from officer-involved shootings since then. Thus, the picture of policing is much different, here, than that of Fremont: in Oakland, the police are at *best* a city-hall failure and at *worst* a threat to your life..

How do we explain this major disparity in the ways that people experience policing at such a short distance away from each other?

First, we must acknowledge the circumstantial differences that make these cases both imperfect parallels and excellent opportunities to isolate contributing factors. One key difference between the two cities is their racial demographics: both cities are predominantly non-white, with white citizens making up just 29.6% of the population in Oakland and 17.2% of the population in Fremont.[16] The majority of Oakland's population is either Hispanic (28.7%) or

[12] City of Oakland, Use of Force Data 2025
[13] City of Oakland, Stops and Dispatches 2025
[14] Edward Swanson, *Report of the Court-Appointed Investigator in Delphine Allen v. City of Oakland*
[15] Ibid
[16] U.S. Census Bureau 2024

Black (20.2%), while Fremont displays a clearer racial majority with 63.8% of the population being Asian. The Black population in Fremont was just under 3%, as of the 2024 Census.

Another other key explanatory difference between the cities is their income levels. Serving largely as a commuter-hub for Silicon Valley, the average household income in Fremont was $181,506 as of the 2024 Census. Likewise, at the time of the last census, Fremont's poverty rate was 5.2%, less than half of the national average. In comparison, the average household income in Oakland was $101,600 in the same year– still about $20,000 above the national average, but the poverty rate was 13.4%, almost 2 points higher than the national average of 10.6%.[17]

Turning toward theory, we find ourselves to have a few more pieces of the puzzle– at least for Oakland. In "Police Are Our Government: Politics, Political Science, and the Policing of Race-Class Subjugated Communities," Joe Soss and Vesla Weaver argue that the police act as major enforcers of structural positions in Race-Class Subjugated (RCS) communities, ultimately serving as "class-calibrated race-making institutions."[18] Here, the authors use the term 'RCS communities' to acknowledge the interplay of race and class dynamics in one's social positioning and vulnerability under the carceral state, emphasizing how either identity works toward the creation and maintenance of the "racialized poor."[19] As both byproducts and victims of the racialization of crime, they argue RCS communities experience disproportionate amounts of policing in comparison to their white counterparts, increasing the likelihood of carceral contact. Thus, policing acts to create and perpetuate the criminalization of marginalized race and class groups, allowing us to begin to see how over-policing racially and economically-subjugated communities reproduces inequality.

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[17] Ibid
[18] Soss and Weaver, 2017, p. 569
[19] Ibid 567

Soss and Weaver also give us a number of important insights regarding the impacts of mass surveillance, which are especially significant to the Oakland case. Beyond purporting to serve crime prevention and management, they argue that mass surveillance directly distinguishes trusted insiders from criminal outsiders, establishing an implicit, often racialized, social order.[20] If we are to then return to Oakland, a city in which *everyone* is under surveillance, we are left to wonder what to make of a town theoretically designating its *entire population* as a suspicious criminal class. Additionally, the authors argue that the physical experience of being surveilled in equal parts educates citizens on how their government views them and, as the authors put it, teaches "class-based lessons on who is a citizen deserving of fairness and justice and who constitutes a group of dangerous others deserving of severe punishment, monitoring, and virtual branding."[21] Citizens are as aware of their government's distrust of them as they are of the political objective it serves.

Political awareness gives way to political agency, Soss and Weaver go on to claim, as they proceed to argue that "as police powers advance marginalizing and controlling forms of racial socialization, they also foster insurgent political resistance."[22] Correspondingly, we have been able to observe a long-standing pattern of citizen-resistance of police oppression in Oakland, indicating that citizens have come to understand what the state asserts their role to be and rejected it. After the previously mentioned case of *Allen v. City of Oakland*, the relationship between the city and its constituents has remained contentious, as the police department has consistently faced wide-scale backlash for continued civil rights violations and overt hostility towards its citizens. For example, the 2011 Occupy Oakland movement, inspired by Occupy Wall Street, was initiated not as a response to an individual event, but rather due to mounting

[20] Ibid 579
[21] Ibid
[22] Ibid 583

frustrations with the city's inaction on structural patterns of police brutality.[23] Yet, despite continued pressures and a court-mandated duty to continuously attempt compliance with the Police Commission's standards, little has changed: OPD's use of force rate is notably high, the department does not disclose its operations at the state standard, and the integration of mass-surveillance technology will only further exert control over the masses who decry civil rights violations. In other words, with the active disapproval of their constituency, the Oakland Police Department has moved in favor of methods of control over consent.

Still, while Soss and Weaver's model is excellently representative of the Oakland case, we have still only satisfied half of the issue. As it currently stands, much of the present literature fails to consider how policing practices may change across different communities in the interest of maintaining institutional legitimacy and authority, should either still appear feasibly attainable. Thus, to begin to understand the full breadth of experiences of policing, we must attempt to understand law enforcement as a multi-faceted and multi-*faced* machine, rather than a monolith.[24]

To address this side of the issue, we can begin by turning our attention toward the venues of police interaction in wealthy communities that establish the nature of the everyday relationship between police and citizens, in the absence of frequent punitive interactions. In many communities– and especially affluent ones like Fremont– citizens often interact with police through a more varied array of contexts than within a traditional model of law enforcement, the bulk of which are more likely to be amicable than not. For examples of this, consider how in addition to direct law enforcement, the Fremont police also cover the School Resource Officer (SRO) programs for city public schools, facilitate Neighborhood Watch groups, and operate the

[23] See M. King, "Disruption is Not Permitted: The Policing and Social Control of Occupy Oakland"
[24] See also "Too Much Knowledge, Too Little Power: An Assessment of Political Knowledge in Highly Policed Communities" for additional canonical understandings of the "faces" of policing.

animal shelter.[25] The Fremont Police Department also prioritizes direct community engagement initiatives, having hosted over 100 community meetings and events in 2025 to share updates on projects and build community networks.[26] These increased opportunities for voluntary engagement challenge the strict model of the second-face of the state, as citizens are given more and more opportunities to seek support from adjunct policing services as opposed to strictly interacting with the state through punitive measures. The inherent threat associated with the police is curtailed by their passivity in the bulk of the interactions through which citizens are likely to interact with them.

Secondarily to the pacifying nature of these events, involving the community in policing also allows for the visual "democratization" of law enforcement, even as the police nonetheless maintain a monopoly on carceral power. For example, many police departments regularly host ride-alongs for high-school students and coordinate community crime-stoppers programs. Through such programs, everyday policing practices are made to seem innocuous and accessible, reframing them as open resources of the communities they monitor rather than latent threats. Crime-stoppers and Neighborhood Watch programs, in particular, reframe policing as a community responsibility, encouraging voluntary participation. Consequently, policing comes to look like a two-way relationship and constituents become active contributors to their own surveillance.

A final issue, in diverging from Soss and Weaver's model, is considering how police ideals and practices may shift to better adhere with community values for the purposes of gaining or maintaining authority. Particularly in communities with either a low natural trust or need for a significant police presence, as might be found in a majority non-white or low-crime area, the

[25] FPD Annual Report 2025
[26] Ibid

face of policing might change substantially in order to maintain institutional legitimacy. Returning to the Fremont case, the FPD's 2045 goal of carbon neutrality stands as an immediate example of this phenomenon. The FPD face no clear, immediate economic incentives for a green push, yet positive publicity is undeniably always beneficial for police departments. Thus, if the interests of its constituency are not overly costly or a significant departure from a police department's central mission, techniques of policing may accordingly adapt to fit community values substantially in the interest of gaining or maintaining community consent.

The synthesis of Soss and Weaver's theory with this secondary conceptualization of the changing face of policing reveals a substantial inequality in not only the qualities of policing that people experience depending on whether they fall within an RCS category, but also in the explicit aims of the policing operations they are subject to. Police departments in affluent communities are incentivized to prioritize legitimacy and maintaining trust in their communities, while RCS communities are more likely to be subjected to social control techniques and violence. The visibility of policing is also extremely variable under these circumstances, as departments in affluent jurisdictions benefit from transparency that valorizes high-standard policing and increases citizen support, while mass-surveillance methods in RCS constituencies incarcerate at significantly higher rates and make institutional accountability nearly impossible.

The practical effects of this conceptualization are also worth considering. Just as over-policing RCS communities leads to mass incarceration and creates "broken window" communities, police departments will always have political and economic incentives to tailor themselves to the wealthy. As police departments and their methods become increasingly ideologically aligned with such communities, they will very likely attract more wealthy constituents who feel suited to the model of policing they see exhibited. A "safe neighborhood"

thus has the potential to become a sheltered enclave of modern, progressive policing ideology as the wealthy continue to move in, bringing greater tax dollars and increased political incentives to maintain such approaches with them. Peaceful policing thus becomes a privilege of the wealthy, while mass incarceration flourishes in poorer communities.

Given this new understanding of how the faces of policing may change, the race-based differences in policing will only continue to be stratified as these effects are reproduced on either side and wealthier communities live under less punitive, ideologically lenient police departments while lower income communities are subjected to techniques of mass surveillance that only perpetuate carceral overrepresentation. As the police become an accessory to the rich and continue to subjugate the poor, what Soss and Weaver once called a race-making institution thus also becomes a class-making institution. The more that police in wealthy communities strive to fit community ideals and maintain consent, the easier it becomes to group them into the first face of the state; meanwhile, the many negative effects of policing continue to be reproduced in RCS communities, as departments have neither the time, resources, nor incentive to improve.

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