



# Contested Distances, Valorized Affinities

## *Local Concerns and Aspirations about Policing on the Urban Margins of Stockholm*

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### Abstract

Drawing on notions of distance versus proximity, and by engaging with critical discussions about reassurance and community policing, this article examines how the police's local presence or absence is reflected in concerns and aspirations about policing in two disadvantaged suburbs of Stockholm. It presents findings from interviews with seventeen adults active in local neighborhood associations. The results show that respondents' concerns are commonly related to police practices and modes of being that create distances in a negative sense, such as officer discontinuity and disengagement, vehicle patrols which fail to involve personal interaction, and subjection of the neighborhood youth to intimidating checks and controls. The respondents' aspirations, on the other hand, pertain to police availability in and familiarity with the neighborhood, visible foot patrols, modesty, and courtesy in verbal exchanges with members of the community. These concerns and aspirations are interwoven with a shared tendency to de-emphasize policing with respect to broader issues of neighborhood disadvantage. In brief, these results point to the destigmatizing potentials of a policing that foregrounds locally attentive, community-affirming practices in the context of neighborhood marginalization, while cautioning us against turning the police into a pervasive force.

### Keywords

policing, neighborhoods, community, urban, inequality, Sweden

## 1. Introduction

In Sweden, making policing more locally attached and accessible has been on the political and institutional agenda ever since the nationalization of the police force in 1965 (Furuhaugen, 2009; Westerberg, 2020). More recently, public debates about local presence and visibility of the police have put an overwhelming focus on minority-populated, disadvantaged neighborhoods in the urban peripheries (Polisen, 2017; Riksrevisionen, 2020). This accords with, and is in part a result of, the widespread perception of these neighborhoods as the epicenters of crime and insecurity. Eruptions of social unrest that arise as a reaction to police handling of situations, and rampant deadly shootings due to gang-related violence, in particular, inform negative narratives about these places.

In this context, the police's local engagement appears a reinvigorated goal to build better relations with communities subject to urban exclusion and stigmatization. The presence of the police in such neighborhoods continues to be a vexed issue, though. Previous research provides certain indications of over-policing as regards, above all, interactions with the youth. As a recent study lays bare, police stops and street controls based on suspicion of drug possession tend to concentrate more heavily on poor neighborhoods and young males with non-western background (Estrada et al., 2022). For ethnic minority youths who reside in these suburbs, encounters with the police often become intimidating, recurrent, and inimical to their sense of belonging to broader society (Haller et al., 2020; Wästerfors & Alm, 2020). Such instances do not seem to be confined to street interactions alone. As Mulinari (2019) notes on Swedish Muslims from stigmatized neighborhoods, contacts and 'voluntary talks' initiated by the secret police service under the frame of anti-terrorism bear similar consequences.

Perhaps rightfully, the literature gives much heed to the perspectives of the disadvantaged youth considering that they are more routinely policed. Admittedly, though, questions about local policing, especially in marginalized suburbs, matter for a greater section of the neighborhood populace (Bell, 2016; Madsen & Kammersgaard, 2022). Bearing this in mind, the present work turns its gaze toward adult experiences and expectations about policing in Stockholm's suburbs. It draws on interviews with seventeen adult respondents as participants of local associations in two relatively deprived suburbs that I fictively call Grönort and Lillberg. In theoretical terms, I engage with interdisciplinary debates on distance and proximity in police–community relations (e.g., Innes, 2004; 2020; O'Reilly, 2024), and critical reflections on reassurance and community policing (Loader, 2006; Gascón & Roussel, 2019; Akarsu, 2020; González & Mayka, 2023).

As neighborhood communities are not singular in composition, neither are respondents in this study homogenous in their views and perceptions about policing at local level. Still, they contest and value police practices that reflect their common concerns and aspirations, which is the focus of the discussion here. In this regard, the premises of locally engaged policing, as in officers who are available, recognizable, and knowledgeable about the neighborhood, attentive to community concerns and vulnerabilities, preferably in foot patrols, and maintain courteous interactions with people, seem to be a shared aspiration among the interviewees. Such policing is valorized in its actual or anticipated ability to forge meaningful affinities. In several instances and situations, though, the police are rather experienced as a distant force, both physically and symbolically, akin to Goldstein's (2012) notion of 'absent presence'. Narratives about policing or police officers who are unfamiliar with the neighborhood, difficult to reach out to, transient, mostly observed in vehicles, and insensitive to already stigmatized youth, are germane to such experiences. Notably, these concerns and aspirations exist side by side with what I call de-emphasizing the police – that is, a critical appreciation of the limits of policing in addressing the problems in disadvantaged suburbs.

Based on these findings, I argue that in Sweden, policing that gives priority to local attachment and community-affirming approaches in places such as Grönort and Lillberg may not reflect the lived experiences of many, but it might have peculiar advantages in its potential to destigmatize and bridge existing 'recognition gaps' engendered by neighborhood marginalization and exclusion (Lamont, 2018). On the other hand, given respondents' de-emphasis of the police and scholarly criticism about 'ambient' policing strategies (e.g. Loader, 2006), there is wisdom in weighing the possible gains of such strategies against the likelihood of police expansionism in the context of urban deprivation.

## 2. Distances and proximities in policing neighborhoods

Local police presence and proximity to neighborhood communities have long been important questions for policing policy and scholarship. Within the Anglo-American tradition, the discussion has its roots in the so-called Peelian principles in the nineteenth century – a continuous relationship with the public and its consent was deemed necessary for the police in fulfilling their functions (Emsley, 2013; for a critique see Loader 2016). Today it is conventional wisdom that technological advancement together with changes in police organizational bureaucracy and urban dynamics, particularly in the second half of the twentieth century, gave birth to police practices around the world that created a certain spatial and, admittedly, social *distance* between the police and citizens. In his seminal work on police professionalism, William K. Muir (1979) noticed that “[b]y 1970 the walking beat had disappeared from most city streets” due to the reasons mentioned above, plus “the high costs of police labor” (p. 63), paving the way for increasing reliance on patrolling in cars.

Most commentators concur that the historical transition toward motorization “lessened opportunities for casual, non-conflictual interactions between police patrol officers and public” (Bowling et al., 2019, p. 219). Compared to traditional policing that was more localized in neighborhoods, as Reiss (1992) earlier discussed regarding the United States, the rise of the command-and-response model that was supposed to be more rapid and efficient has ironically alienated citizens who “experienced impersonality in their contacts with the police and abandonment of their community and its problems” (p. 92). In more centralized settings such as France, the spread of motorized patrols and the closure of small neighborhood stations went together with the assignment of police officers “with no ties in the neighborhood where they work” and who, in addition, “do not seek to form relationships with the local residents, whom are to them merely strangers and people to be managed” (Mouhanna, 2021, p. 80).

Against this background, urban policing research hints that neighborhood communities may, at least to some extent, valorize relational proximity to, rather than impersonal distance from, the police. Reporting on a mid-size English town, Sparks and colleagues (2001) observed that many residents from the adult population would prefer “the ‘return’ of a police officer who is readily identifiable as belonging to a specific community” (p. 891). Umbach’s (2011) historical chronicle on the Housing Authority Police Department in New York (1952–1995) corroborates this point and documents how communities in public housing projects endured somewhat positive relations with officers from this autonomous unit who frequently patrolled on foot and were well acquainted with – and in some cases even lived in – these neighborhoods. In her study on policing and residential segregation in Cleveland, Bell (2020) similarly shows that social and physical proximity to the police might be desirable “even for low-income people of color who might in other situations exhibit legal cynicism” (p. 937). As Sausdal (2019) underscores in his ethnography on Danish detectives, proximity to the *policed* has, for better or worse, considerable appeal for police officers themselves who may otherwise get mired in the growth of distant surveillance strategies.

It should be noted that both common-sense and academic appreciations of a policing style which is on more intimate terms with neighborhood communities ‘like the good old days’ have nostalgic overtones and may reflect “the old myth of the friendly cop on the beat” (Walker, 1984, p. 86). Such romanticized views of the past, as Walker (1984) once commented on American history, can also be discerned in justifications for aggressive order maintenance strategies that tend to produce adverse consequences for, and criminalization of, disadvantaged minorities in the urban space (Legewie & Fagan, 2019; Legewie & Cricco, 2022).

However, the premises of local proximity can also be found in the advocacy of more lenient approaches that aim to address public alienation from the police, such as reassurance, neighborhood, or community-oriented policing (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Innes et al., 2020; O'Reilly, 2024). In a well-cited article, Innes (2004) points to the growing realization by scholars and policymakers of the fact that public safety concerns and fear of crime do not really follow actual crime rates and risk of victimization, a fact, he argues, that points to a 'reassurance gap' (p. 156). Police officers who are known to the local populace and "visible, accessible and familiar," not least through foot patrols, should thus be adopted as one of the components of a reassurance strategy. As the argument goes, it is insufficient to rely on police officers alone but also necessary to involve citizens in coproducing security and to make policing "responsive to the needs of the public" by giving priority to "problems that matter most to them" (p. 162, see also Innes et al., 2020) Beyond the English-speaking world, similar ideas informed persistent or obsolete practices such as *police de proximité* in France (de Maillard & Zagrodzki, 2021), *toplum destekli polislik* in Turkey (Akarsu, 2020) or *närpolis* in Sweden (Peterson, 2010), to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

Promising as it is, the notion of locally engaged policing that resonates with what Bayley (1996) previously listed as the virtues of "our police officer" in the neighborhood, has also been met by criticism. In a thoughtful intervention, Loader (2006) argued that such strategies are likely to turn the police into a pervasive force. These forms of "ambient policing", as he put, stem from an interest "to redress what is alleged to have become the insecurity-generating remoteness of police authority from everyday life" (p. 205) and draw on the flawed assumption that the police will deliver better services if they work in greater proximity to the public. Although Loader acknowledges variations in ambient policing strategies, he claims that they "share an express or implied commitment to raising overall numbers of policing operatives [...], coupled with a conception of the policing purpose that is expansive, proactive, and visible" (p. 205).

In fact, Loader is not alone in this critical assessment (e.g., Waddington, 1999; Herbert, 2006; Rios et al., 2020; Mazzola, 2023). However, he makes two points, among others, that are worth mentioning here: First, the ideas behind ambient policing overstate the role that policing plays in building the public's sense of security. Efforts to make the police a co-owner of social problems and a necessary component of community cohesion "risk making security a *pervasive* [emphasis original] feature of social and political life" (p. 208). As a result, the police may turn into a "colonizing force" that enters "areas of public life and policy (housing, or education, or youth work) where they have no proper business" (p. 209). Second, the belief that the police need to become less distant from the public and everyday life mostly speaks to the fears, demands, and concerns of society's more privileged members – in other words, demands to make policing more "visible, accessible, and familiar" are often "pressed by middle-class constituencies replete with social and economic capital" and show "little express concern with the interests of the routinely policed" (pp. 207–208). Under conditions in which security thus becomes pervasive, he adds, anxieties about crime and insecurity can lead to an "authoritarian spiral", that is, voices for "more police, more police powers, crack-downs on this offense or those suspects" (p. 216), or to a "fragmentation spiral" whereby citizens act upon their anxieties by their own means of security provision.

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1. Recent research continues to produce mixed results on the promises of community policing initiatives around the world. An analysis of two waves of survey data shows positive returns in terms of reducing public fear of crime (Lee et al., 2023). By contrast, an experimental study on six countries from the Global South finds that community policing neither contributes to public trust in the police nor reduces crime (Blair et al., 2021).

As recent research lays bare, Loader's concerns are not totally unfounded. In the context of low-income, minority-populated urban areas, initiatives to bring the police closer to local communities may indeed lead to "expansion of police power" (Gascón & Roussell, 2019, on Los Angeles), formation of "citizen forces" with authoritarian, repressive demands (Akarsu, 2020, on Istanbul), or manifestation of "asymmetric citizenship" that translates into unequal policing of more versus less privileged groups (González & Mayka, 2023, on São Paulo). Having said that, community understandings of policing that aims to reach out to residents of poor and stigmatized districts can also be fragmented, perhaps even contradictory. Studying a Danish case of a neighborhood labeled as "ghetto," Madsen and Kammersgaard (2022) discuss initiatives to increase police visibility and local cooperation that are both well received and contested by different members of the population. Approval of such initiatives seems to be contingent on "the ability of the police to inscribe themselves positively into the socio-historical dynamics within a targeted community" (p. 2).

In short, even though questions related to police local engagement, proximity and presence versus social and professional distance are perhaps as old as the history of the institution itself, their relevance has hardly faded over time. Disadvantaged neighborhoods with concentrated minority populations raise specific challenges and questions due to the frequent community experiences with over-policing and under-protection (Rios, 2011; Fassin, 2013; Body-Gentrot & Wenden, 2014; Barret & Welsh, 2018; Magaloni et al., 2020; Yonucu, 2022). While differences abound as to material destitution and state policies of redress, urban margins are widely subjected to territorial stigmatization that infects local populations' relationship with and perceptions about the state (Wacquant 2007). Sweden does not seem to be a complete outlier in this regard (Haller et al., 2020; Wästerfors & Alm, 2020; Estrada et al., 2022; Mulinari & Keskinen, 2022). Hence, it is plausible to assume that in socially deprived neighborhoods where the state in some respects is experienced as absent or neglectful, policing that is visible, familiar, and accessible can be a relative aspiration as long as it is attentive and shows courtesy and understanding (see also Goldstein 2017). Such policing may have community-*affirming* implications and be valued in its potential to bridge what Michèle Lamont (2018) calls "recognition gaps" that stem from "disparities in worth and cultural memberships between groups in a society" (pp. 421–422).

### 3. At the welfare state's urban margins

Grönort and Lillberg are two suburbs in northern and southern fringes of Stockholm. Large sections of these neighborhoods were built under the ambitious Million Program in the 1960s and 1970s. The program's overarching aim was to address the country's pressing housing shortage in the post-war period and to provide affordable and decent accommodation. It targeted especially those who were much affected by the structural changes in the labor market due to mechanization of production and had to move from rural to urban centers.

The Million Program was effective in the supply of relatively high standard dwellings for significant segments of the population through non-profit municipal enterprises and prioritization of rental tenure. While monumental in size and scope, this project owed its achievement in part to rapid construction in a functional style (Swedish National Board of Housing, 2008). This created residential enclaves, especially in urban outskirts mostly characterized by long, monotonous apartment blocks far from inner-city facilities (Grundström & Molina, 2016). Consequently, Million Program districts have above all attracted young and lower-income groups, plus newly arrived immigrant communities. For more affluent households, though, these neighborhoods barely served as a long-term settlement alternative and were at

best regarded as a temporary solution (Molina, 1997, p. 87). The shift toward a more deregulated, market-oriented housing policy in the following decades resulted in the shrinking of state subsidies and brought about material burdens for maintenance and renewal. Over time, many dwellings of the Million Program have deteriorated due to lack of investment and remained “in severe need of upgrading” (Listerborn et al., 2020, p. 122).

At present, both Grönort and Lillberg are lower-income neighborhoods in suburban Stockholm. Ethnic minorities make up between two-thirds and three-fourths of their residents, proportionally much higher than Stockholm as a whole. The average income of the population aged between 20 and 64 was reported, in 2021, as being circa 25% lower in Grönort and Lillberg than in Stockholm County as a whole. In Grönort, the proportion of residents who have hard time making ends meet and receive financial assistance from the state was registered as being three times higher than the county average in 2022 (5.4 versus 1.8%). Taking the same reference for comparison, the ratio of the population at risk of persistent poverty was reported as being almost twice as much in Lillberg the year before (11%). Children are particularly vulnerable in this respect. Official data show that in areas with the greatest socioeconomic difficulties, about 30% of children suffer from low standards of living, whereas the corresponding number for areas with most favorable conditions is 2% (Statistics Sweden, 2022, p. 14). As regards educational attainment, the latest figures reveal that almost one in five persons aged between 25 and 64 living in either of these neighborhoods have no education beyond pre-high school education, a ratio which presents a sharp contrast (up to six times) with more prosperous areas of the city. Housing conditions in poorer suburbs complement this picture. Overcrowded apartments are indeed more commonplace in places such as Grönort and Lillberg, and in some districts account for up to 60% of all residents (Stockholm Municipality, 2020, p. 19).

These figures are at odds with the egalitarian ideals of the Swedish welfare state. Indeed, urban inequality and segregation have grown on a relentless trajectory since the 1990s as neoliberalism took a firm hold in the country and become decidedly racialized (Schierup & Ålund, 2011; Skryman et al., 2023). Like their counterparts, disadvantaged neighborhoods in Sweden are subject to degrading discourses. Negative media coverage inflates the image of these areas as hostile and dangerous environments (Ericsson et al., 2002; Stjernborg et al., 2015).

Surveys into experiences with crime provide a more nuanced picture. With respect to crimes such as assault, robbery, property offenses, or crimes against persons such as pick-pocketing, harassment, or fraud, differences between disadvantaged and other urban areas are discernible. Self-reported victimization seems overall higher in the former, though not indicative of a huge gap. Moreover, a greater portion of the population report that they feel insecure out at night in their own neighborhood (National Council for Crime Prevention [hereafter Brå], 2018a). The same holds for Grönort and Lillberg. Part of the explanation may lie in the latest spiral of gang-related gun violence that particularly afflicts disadvantaged neighborhoods (Sturup et al., 2019). Frustrated by this development, civil and parental initiatives such as *Förorten mot våld* (the suburb against violence) have been formed. Notably, these groups consider ongoing gun violence as a “national crisis” (Gelin, 2017).

#### 4. The police in place

Grönort and Lillberg belong to police districts North and South in Stockholm. Police districts operate under the broader geographical division of police regions and are themselves subdivided into smaller police areas. This came into effect after the reorganization

of the entire police force in 2015 that unified 21 police authorities under a single organization (Swedish Police Authority, hereafter SPA). The latest drift toward centralization notwithstanding, discussions about policing policy and reform in the country have repeatedly invoked the idea of a locally anchored police service almost as a Sisyphean task, ever since the Swedish police was nationalized in 1965. Initially, this idea arose as a reaction to the tendency of the police bureaucracy to turn into monolithic machinery alienated from citizen needs and interests (Westerberg, 2020). More investment in *kvarterspolis*er (neighborhood police) who would master their beat on foot patrols and become the familiar face of the police at neighborhood level was one of the proposals that came out of public inquiry and police commission reports from the late 1970s (Furuhagen, 2009, pp. 51–53).<sup>2</sup>

Emphasis on local attachment was also imprinted on *närpolisreformen* – a police reform which was launched in the early 1990s and drew its inspiration from the premises of community- and problem-oriented policing. The reform introduced a division of labor whereby much of the core police functions would be solely undertaken at the local level. It promoted the idea of cooperation with local population, schools, and social services (Brå, 2001).<sup>3</sup> This rationale also permeates the formalization of concerted efforts between the police and municipalities since 2008, and in advertised, if not consistently held, police–citizen meetings after 2015 (Brå, 2018, p. 7).

Within this trajectory, neighborhoods like Grönort and Lillberg have been accorded a more relegated status in local policing discourse and practice. Upon government commission in 2014, SPA was given the mandate to identify and develop specific strategies at “problem areas” or what in common parlance are known as *utsatta områden*. Since then, SPA has been categorizing neighborhoods it labels with low socioeconomic status and criminal penetration, reluctance to cooperate with state agents, prevalence of “conspiracy of silence” and “parallel social structures” as alarming deviations (Polisen, 2017). For that matter, police operations such as Fenix and Mareld target neighborhoods designated in SPAs classification (Brå 2016, Ghazinour & Eriksson, 2022). These operations, it is reported, were largely driven by an objective to contain what according to police authorities constitutes “society-threatening criminality”, including eruptions of social unrest, youth gangs, use and sale of drugs, hate crimes, extortion, gun violence, arson, and terrorism financing (Brå, 2016, p. 19–24). The extent to which such operations serve or improve the public’s sense of security in these areas remains dubious, let alone why specifically these infractions, but not others, are deemed a peculiar threat to society. Lately, the reliability of SPA’s categorization of neighborhoods has also come under scrutiny (Riksrevisionen, 2020; Salonen, 2023).

## 5. The interviews

As “sociology’s standard workhorse method” – Lamont and Swidler’s (2014) description – interviewing brings forth respondents’ “credible voice to experience” (Gubrium et al., 2012, p. 2). It enables the researcher to explore their life experiences that extend over time and space. With this purpose in mind, I conducted interviews with seventeen adult men and women as participants of neighborhood associations in Grönort and Lillberg.

2. Neighborhood officers today are called *områdespolis*er, even though their employment and practices seem to vary (Riksrevisionen, 2020).

3. The reform took place under much economic strain due to the financial crisis in Sweden in the early 1990s. As a result, no additional resources were allotted to the implementation of the reform and many neighborhood police stations were closed in the years that followed.

My focus on neighborhood associations is motivated as follows: These organizations can be seen as local forums that bring together people who are interested in, and willing to do something for, the neighborhood. Through such engagements people meet one another and share personal and vicarious experiences pertinent to neighborhood issues. Thus, neighborhood associations may enable their members to become active participants in urban matters that affect their everyday lives (Abers, 2000; Bengtsson et al., 2009). In Sweden, the general shift since the 1990s toward a service-oriented civil society, together with the gradual disappearance of district offices of public and private enterprises, has left local associations in resource-poor urban territories with a challenge to substitute for the welfare state in addressing urban disadvantage (Kings, 2011). As one might expect, such a daunting task entails a certain familiarity with the needs and concerns of the local population.

To reach out to my prospective respondents, I primarily relied on purposeful and convenience sampling. Such an empirical strategy has obvious limitations as regards generalizability and the likelihood that the researcher ends up meeting people whose stories are “not necessarily reflective of all viewpoints” (Saumure & Given, 2008, p. 125). Wary of this constraint, I tried to diversify my points of entry by using multiple channels. I began by focusing on those associations that have a primary interest in neighborhood social issues rather than the ones whose main orientation is recreational. Such a distinction nevertheless proved to be less straightforward than I thought as I observed that concern with neighborhood social issues was implicit in many associations, even if their domain of activity was, for instance, sports. I also attended public events, and navigated through municipality homepages and social media as a first step to get in touch with associations that might be relevant for, and possibly contribute to, this study. Ultimately, I contacted associations with divergent and convergent orientations such as organizing leisure for the youth and the elderly, weekly night patrols on the streets, assisting people in communicating with public and private services, providing homework assistance to students in primary and secondary education, and taking various roles in tenant and property-owner associations. To establish rapport, I held prior meetings with my prospective respondents.

Interview participants were adult men (eight) and women (nine) aged between 28 and 70, with a majority above 40 years old. In this respect, this research foregrounds the perspectives of more senior members of the local population in contrast to the studies that focus on the experiences of youths (Haller et al., 2020; Wästerfors & Alm, 2020). Even though age distribution is thus rather skewed, adult perspectives might differ from those of youths who more frequently become targets of police-initiated contacts (see also Fahlberg, 2018). That is, adult perceptions may be less antagonistic in general; however, their involvement in local associations provides a vantage point to gain vicarious experiences that may influence one’s own perceptions about criminal (in)justice (Mondak et al., 2017).

I conducted the interviews in a period from October 2021 to April 2022. The interviews lasted about an hour and usually took place in the associations’ facilities, in public places and, in one case only, in the respondent’s home. I met them individually, except for four occasions where two people from the same association were present at the same time. I asked them about their experiences with and observations and expectations about policing at local level. With informed consent, the interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. The names and places presented in the results are all pseudonyms. For analytical purposes, I first coded the material openly in a loose fashion, and then reduced the initial labels to more encompassing categories (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2015). The discussion below presents the three main themes that capture the contested and valorized aspects of policing in Grönort and Lillberg from the perspective of the respondents.



## 6. Results

### 6.1 Contested distances

A central theme that weaves through the interviews relates to the concerns that several respondents raised about experiencing the police as a distant force. Distance can be both physical and symbolic in the sense of remoteness to the needs and interests of local communities. In this latter sense, the police can be perceived as distant in their palpable presence, redolent of what Goldstein (2012) describes as the absent presence of the police. Such distance from the police is evident particularly in my respondents' utterances about police interactions with the youth.

A common trope is the experience of policing as relatively inaccessible or disengaged. While this narrative is more common among those who have reservations about policing in poorer suburbs, I also heard similar remarks by respondents who are not particularly cynical about the agents of criminal justice. Patricia, a pensioner who has lived in Grönort for almost four decades, thinks that it is not easy to reach out to the police when needed. She says, "No, there is no time [for the police] to meet people," and continues: "Then you wonder why people are quiet. 'Oh, we have a *tystnadskultur* [conspiracy of silence]. We don't have a *tystnadskultur*. People talk to one another; they just don't talk to the police." She would not mind having regular occasions to meet the police in a public place, like a one-stop shop. The existence of a call center, however, does not seem appeal to her.

When I call up the switchboard, I am going to get somebody in Lalaland, Luleå [a city far north in Sweden], who cares where they are. You know they don't know anything about the area I live in. They are going to give me the most common, general answer that they can give [...] There is no time the police can be reached. As in once a week we have two hours in the library or in citizen offices.

One might argue that physical meetings as Patricia favors would be preferable for more elderly members of a neighborhood community. Even if this is true, it is not only those who wish to see more occasions for police–community meetings. Some respondents spoke about police briefings on Friday or Saturday evenings prior to voluntary night-patrol shifts in the neighborhood. While such initiatives are generally welcome, in some interviews I noted that they can also be experienced as a mundane ritual. Naim, who wants to see a greater information flow from the police to the community, says, for instance, "I wish to know more about what they do for the safety of the neighborhood, how they work and so on."

Distance can also be related to the experience that the police are not fully immersed in the neighborhood context. Consider Lila, in her early thirties, who is involved in a cultural association with a particular interest in the creativity of the neighborhood youth. Lila observes that there is a relatively high turnover of police officers in Grönort – something she finds to be an obstacle for police–community relations.

Today it feels like there are so many police officers who just come and leave. I wonder how they can distinguish ordinary people, criminals, youngsters... youngsters who are just having fun. There's a strong jargon here in the suburb. I think it can really be difficult for the police to understand "Is this a fight or are they just fooling around?"

That the police simply "come and leave," she notes, feeds into unfamiliarity with the neighborhood. In our interview, Lila also pointed out that some police officers find it burdensome to work in places like Grönort. While admitting that being dispatched to a place one is not

used to may have its own drawbacks, she claims that police officers at least have the possibility to recover since they can “clock in and clock out.” “[C]ommunities here don’t recover because this is their life,” she concludes. Concern with police unfamiliarity is expressed in other interviews, too. Jasmin, 52, has a longstanding interest in youth community centers and is a regular in voluntary night patrols. Overall, she seems to be satisfied with local police work in Lillberg. She nevertheless claims that at times of social unrest and protests, escalation is likely “when they send police forces from somewhere else because they don’t know the neighborhood.” Another respondent, Jens, remarks on an issue that resonates with Lila’s and Jasmin’s thoughts. In his fifties, Jens has been active in an association for property owners and generally has a positive impression about local policing. During our meeting he shared an anecdote about a conversation he had with a former police chief about neighborhood safety.

Sometimes I talked to the chief neighborhood officer of the local police district those days [late 1990s]. Once I asked him, “What do you think would increase safety in [district]?” “Neighborhood officers (*kvarterspolis*) of old times on squares and streets. That would increase safety,” he answered. Baffled by his reply I kept on asking, “You are a police chief, why don’t you just do that?” “Well, no one [police officers] wants to,” he said.

As it were, Jens seems to be bothered by this assumed unwillingness of patrolling officers to get more involved in the neighborhood. Even though his anecdote dates back several years, it does not seem to have lost its currency altogether. Many respondents told that they almost always come across the police roaming in vehicles or parked in the center of the neighborhood. Some claimed that the police have become more visible lately – nonetheless, they have become more visible through car patrols. Because it casts a watchful but distanced eye, this police routine is often equated with surveillance. Dedicated full time to what he calls a grass-roots initiative, David, in his late thirties, has just such a feeling. He says, “Sometimes you walk on the sidewalks in Grönort and get hit in the face with bright lights ... You wonder ‘what’s happening?’ You get scared and realize it’s a police car. That’s how they move around the neighborhood. With lights fully on, you know, I don’t understand,” he laments. Although not all respondents share David’s view, many of them would like to see more officers on foot patrols in the streets.

In certain ways of being present, the police thus seem to be experienced as a distant authority. This brings us to the last theme of this section – that is, stigmatizing or distance-creating interventions. Since my respondents are young adults and older, most of them parents even, they are not typical targets of police checks and suspicion. Hence, their personal experiences may compare favorably with those of the neighborhood (minority) youth. Several of them still have misgivings about the specific ways police officers interact with the youth. Even for those who are not principally against body checks and drug controls, “it gets bit too much when they arrive with a police van, step out and start going around and inspecting people,” as Jacob, 28, admits. “We have quite many Black fellows, very nice fellows who have been subjected to such measures many times and even had to take their clothes off,” says Roger, 64, during the same conversation. According to Halim, who is a father himself, the neighborhood youths are tarred with the same brush.

When the police approach a gathering of youngsters it looks as if they [the police] want to create a fuss, display a tough attitude first. The problem is that these youngsters haven’t got the chance to develop a relationship, a friendly discussion with the police.

Halim is not the only one who worries about the criminalization of the youth. Amira, who liaises with different associations and their members on a regular basis, has similar concerns. She also surmises a tendency among police officers to trivialize their own transgressions: “Everyone makes mistakes [...] Why assume police can’t make mistakes?” she questions and claims that the conspiracy of silence instead exists within the police. David shares Amira’s impressions about collegial support for errant officers within the police force. To him, the police may be benevolent in trying to convey a “nice tone” in handling complaints.

But then there is an actual practice or organizational custom, which can be described as the spirit of the force, if you will. This means that a police officer who is eager to create conflict out there is backed by all other police officers [...] At that point, our confidence collapses altogether when we see that one of their colleagues acted very ... incompatible with professional conduct. Has made a mistake. The police commander we’ve had a dialogue with gives us ... I can’t even explain what he gives us. He gives as a look or gesture that says, “What shall I do?”. But it is not up to me to answer this question, it is up to him.

I infer that such experiences seem to reinforce the image of the police as a distant force. To recapitulate, police practices and modes of being that are perceived as creating distances raise common concerns among the respondents in this study. These concerns are often related to experiencing the police as a remotely available, unengaged authority, yet they also involve routines as car patrols or intimidating interactions with the youth. Such routines and practices do not necessarily have to do with over-policing or under-protection, although in some cases they do. In neighborhoods that are already stigmatized, such as Grönort and Lillberg, I consider that distances may in one sense imply micro-confirmations of existing “recognition gaps” (Lamont, 2018). Moreover, what Loader (2006) finds unconvincing about the “insecurity-generating remoteness of police authority” appears to be a valid issue for many respondents in this study.

## 6.2 Affinities that matter

While several of my respondents voiced their concerns about policing that creates distances of different sort, they also give credit for police work and practices that are perceived as affirming of, and attentive to, the social worth and well-being of the local population. Most commonly, my respondents’ narratives about policing provide multiple accounts of what I call affinities, which entail mutual understandings and a comforting sense of relational proximity that matter for their neighborhood aspirations.

Officer exemplification is one trope through which meaningful affinities are expressed. Active both in her voluntary engagement and as a public employee, Pakiza praises a female police officer who is eager to share her phone number and responsive even when she is off duty. Pakiza finds so much availability rather exceptional and even unnecessary. Still, she does not hide her reverence for this police officer:

She is very much engaged and aware of what people need. I find it important and can relate to it from my own work. Sometimes you should call people and tell them, “I have ten parents who have issues to discuss. Can you just come and talk to them?” “Yeah sure, no problem!” You can do the same when it comes to the gap between the police and the communities here. Find ways to get closer. It is easier to do so when the police are out there and greet people.

Officer exemplification works both as a supporting narrative and as a point of reference.<sup>4</sup> Pakiza is not alone in her sanguine view that the police can become a familiar, reassuring face in the neighborhood. In our meeting, Zeinab and Ida harked back to an event organized as part of the United Nations Day. At the venue, they recalled, a neighborhood police officer gave a talk about his job and police work at municipal level. It was the second time Zeinab listened to him as a speaker. “He was very good at explaining things,” she says. “He was very experienced,” Ida chimes in and adds, “He had a lot of experience.”

Z: He grew up in Lillberg, in the midst of criminality.

I: He knew what he was talking about.

Z: This nonsense [about criminality], he had a great deal of insight.

I: He was well versed.

Z: He was well versed and very competent.

The fact that this police officer had grown up in the same neighborhood bolstered a sense of affinity they both shared. It also squares with what respondents such as David favorably talks about the benefits of recruiting more police officers with a background from the neighborhood. Moreover, officer exemplification can be noticed in narratives about the youth. Like Lila above, Roger has the impression that many police officers in the neighborhood wish to be transferred to another task in another district. Politicians, he says, promise to hire ten thousand more police officers or shorten their education programs. He compares such promises to emergency measures without a long-term perspective. “That’s why we need police officers like [name],” he suggests. “She is good with youngsters. Doesn’t step back but talks to them. Puts her foot down and embraces at the same time. You build relations this way.” It matters, namely, that police officers are committed and engage in courteous interactions with the youth.

As I understand from these and other accounts, affinities are more easily associated with friendly foot patrols, in contrast to roaming in cars mentioned above. In some cases, such experiences were recollected as something which belongs to the past. My interview with Ahmed provides one such example. Ahmed is a senior member of the Grönort community with a personal history of bottom-up organization. He and a number of other residents engaged in a collective effort to come to grips with neighborhood disadvantage on several issues. Ahmed had both promising and embittering encounters with authorities at different levels of public administration. His own observations about policing figures prominently in these narratives. He recalls an earlier project at the behest of a local police chief. A pair of police officers were assigned to each district, he remembers.

Like the old municipal police. They would walk around, greet everyone in the kindergarten, schools, and other places. Police who had contact with people, tried to understand how people lived. Talked to people [...] We had faith in this idea and supported it.

Ahmed claims and bemoans the fact that this approach has been abandoned, nowadays replaced by strategies that foreground toughness. Regardless of whether policing has become more physical than before, the idea of police officers walking around in foot patrols, initiating

4. Officer exemplification resembles ‘officer exceptionalism’ Bell (2016) notes on the experiences of disadvantaged African American women with policing. The difference is that exemplification does not necessarily entail exceptionalism but works as a way of setting example.

habitual conversations with residents, shopkeepers, youngsters and so forth, is mentioned approvingly throughout the interviews. This idea is also consistent with the expectation that police officers should know the neighborhood, are not transient but have a lasting engagement in the local community. As it were, valorized affinities reflect both experiences, past and present, and aspirations. Like Ahmed, Amira's forward-looking view contains a tone of retrospection. Her predilection for locally anchored policing with a recognizable face, on the other hand, is predicated on what she refers to as modesty and understanding.

I would like to have police officers who work here not just to watch and control. Police officers who are among us people, not different faces all the time. Let's say two–three police officers in reach. Not provoking, but modest. The modesty that the police once had faded away for some reason. We need modest police officers who understand the vulnerability that people experience in these parts of the city.

In short, as can be inferred from the interviews, policing that is attentive and responsive on the one hand, and engaged and familiar with the neighborhood milieu on the other, is likely to foster affinities that are valued. In these accounts, social and physical proximity to the police is appraised, not as an unconditional good but as predicated on courtesy and mutual understanding. The preference for casual foot patrols compared to non-interactive vehicle patrols is worth mentioning. In this respect, affinities that matter for the interviewees corroborate previous studies on the appeal to neighborhood communities of locally conscious, recognizable beat officers on foot (e.g., Sparks et al., 2001; O'Reilly 2024). However, aspirations for policing that is more ingrained in neighborhood life and community cohesion, through visible and courteous foot patrols, visits to schools, youth facilities, citizen involvement and so forth are also partially reconcilable with a pervasive policing that permeates everyday life and its social institutions (Loader, 2006). Turning the police into a ubiquitous force does not seem to be readily accepted, though – a topic to which I turn in the next and last section.

### 6.3 De-emphasizing the police

Throughout the interviews, I also observed a tendency among my respondents to de-emphasize the police. This refers to the respondents' objection to the processes in which policing becomes, or is made, the main frame of reference in addressing social problems in disadvantaged suburbs. Some of these objections reflect general frustrations with the perceived failure of societal institutions that produces adverse conditions for the communities as well as the police. Others attribute a vigilant role to assorted actors, including the neighborhood communities themselves, in forestalling crime.

One such account considers policing subservient to a higher-order category of actors or issues. As regards the former, some respondents contend that the police often get the blame for problems they do not exclusively hold sway over. They are bound by political decision-making or prioritization. Jen says, "Now they don't even have time for [investigating] serious violent crimes". To him, policing has been caught up in the exigencies of political rule.

In its current form, the criminal justice system is lagging behind. What politicians are doing now is like trying to believe and hope that more medicine that has never worked properly would work this time. Rather than figuring out what else could work better instead. The situation looks a bit hopeless. I may sound pessimistic but what I mean is that the police might be part of the story, but it is not their fault.

I came across similar assertions throughout the interviews. Lila makes a point akin to Jens, even though her overall impression about policing differs from his: “I sometimes think that the police take a lot of shit for things that many other elements in the society bear responsibility for,” she claims, and continues, “It is not them who decide. They simply do what they are told to.”

De-emphasizing narratives also emerge in my respondents’ detours into the issues of neighborhood disadvantage. In these articulations, policing appears secondary to considerations about poverty, housing conditions, schooling, youth community centers, and the displacement of public and private enterprises. Ahmed is one of those respondents of mine who bemoans the rising urban inequality in Stockholm. During our conversation he recounted how Covid-19 debilitated the households in Grönort due to overcrowded apartments, difficulties in finding employment, summer jobs and internships for the local youth, the closure of district offices and branches of manifold services.

Let us accept that these are not police matters. These are social matters. School results in decline. People who are unemployed. Poverty. Conditions of housing. What can the police do about these things?

Patricia shares Ahmed’s remarks about social processes that leave their mark on the neighborhood as an experience of neglect. She also stresses the problem of overcrowded homes and the need for cheaper housing, and the shortage of facilities for the youth to socialize in their leisure time. “They took them all away,” she claims and wonders, “How much money did you save? And now you have a whole bunch of criminal teenagers [clapping hands]. Couldn’t you see it coming?” Like Ahmed, Patricia points to the growing material gap between more affluent parts of Stockholm and its poorer peripheries.

What have we got out here? We’ve got some clothing shops. We’ve got some restaurants. You can take money out of the ATM. You have one type of healthcare center. You don’t have any post office. You have a minimum post office in [nearby district]. You have something that looks like a post office in [nearby district]. And nowadays you can’t even get letters except two days a week. How can anybody feel like this place is valued?

The desertion of the neighborhood space may not be peculiar to the poorer suburbs, though there it is more likely to be perceived as deprivation. For Patricia, deprivation is intertwined with stigmatizing discourses and practices, as in the avoidance of these neighborhoods by members of the ethnic majority population (e.g., Müller et al. 2018). While policing is “part of the whole process,” she claims, its relevance is secondary to the perils of urban inequality. Other respondents also take issue with the rising prominence of the police as the purported fixer of neighborhood problems. Consider Daniel, a senior member of a tenant association, who says that more police could only bring about a facade of stability.

Let’s say we bring ten thousand more police officers to Lillberg. Things would surely calm down for a moment. What about resurgence [of crime]? The police can well pick up some bros [from the street] or you name it, but it is not as simple as that. I don’t think we should cry out for police only. We should also talk about social services, student assistants at schools and whatsoever if we want to know how things work for people.

I frequently took notice of such references to a variety of actors and institutions that are expected to serve crime-prevention functions. Schools, social services, and community youth centers are commonly mentioned with respect to their ancillary role in forestalling crime. “The police cannot substitute for social services, act like schools or take over youth centers,” says Amira, concerned about the troubles and constraints that haunt the neighborhood youth. “It is when things have gone too far, we should count on the police. Before that, it’s someone else’s work,” echoes Lila.

For some, what she indicates as someone else’s work is barely understood as the sole domain of state institutions or municipal services. Rather, it also falls under the responsibility of civilian, voluntary actors in the neighborhood, such as parents, the elderly and local associations. “We need more people out in the streets in my opinion,” reckons Jasmin, who wishes to see a greater number of associations engaged in neighborhood safety. Others adopt a language of solidarity, civil society cooperation, and bottom-up mobilization. While de-emphasizing the police, they claim agency for the trajectory of the neighborhood. Consider Martha, who is engaged in women’s issues at a local level. She is skeptical about the presumed gains of increased police surveillance in suburbs like Lillberg. Allocating more police resources in the suburbs is not warranted in her view, particularly because it feeds into an easy association between immigrants and crime. It is not the police’s job to constantly keep an eye on the community, she asserts. “What should the police do if kids don’t listen to their parents?” she asks, and elaborates:

It is *our* [emphasis added] duty to take care of our children so that they don’t become criminals. We can avoid it. Of course, this is all related to many other problems such as schools with inadequate resources. If school kids don’t receive sufficient support things will go wrong for them. They start skipping classes, gather somewhere else and come up with nonsense. What should the police do about it?

Such de-emphasizing narratives indicate that respondents’ conceptions of the police are embedded in their broader concerns and aspirations about the neighborhood and its communities. In one sense, de-emphasizing the police can be plausibly interpreted as an objection to the multiple ways policing is configured as the main lens through which to understand and remedy problems in disadvantaged neighborhoods. It follows that it is the malfunction or failure of societal institutions at large which is the problem – and the police are engulfed in it. And yet there is also a parallel tendency to ascribe a crime-prevention role to assorted institutions and actors, including local communities themselves. This reminds us of what Loader (2006) identifies as the fragmentation spiral, although in this case it does not seem to arise out of a sheer sense of under-protection, nor does it seem to follow directly from a general mistrust in or resignation from the police. Instead, it accentuates informal and other types of institutional control as a necessary supplement to policing.

Thus, it can be said that while de-emphasizing the police draws largely on contestations of a pervasive, “ambient” policing (because the problem lies somewhere else), it also carries with it a clarion call for a more diffuse, vigilant social control. In this regard, de-emphasizing the police seems, perhaps paradoxically, to be partially compatible with a way of thinking about civil society and public policy primarily as an “instrument of crime or harm reduction” (Loader & Walker, 2007, p. 16). By extension, one may argue, such reasoning lends a certain validity to Loader’s (2006) cautions about the seamless path toward pervasive security. There is surely some sense in this conclusion. However, pointing to the broader society in its failure to remedy the perils of neighborhood disadvantage and vulnerabilities thereof, I would

rather claim, can be more adequately understood as a wary response to the conditions that make exclusion and the dearth of resources a pervasive feature of existence.

## 7. Conclusion

Local police presence and engagement remain salient issues, particularly in marginalized urban peripheries. There is little doubt that visibility and presence as such are insufficient to describe how policing operates locally. Depending on the nature of specific police routines and practices, as well as interactions with people, proximity versus distance can take different meanings. They may be conceived both as nuisance and as amenity for the neighborhood populace. From the standpoint of the adult respondents in this study, distance turns into an undesirable condition when policing is experienced as inaccessible, relatively disengaged and transient, and remote to the needs and interests of the neighborhood. By contrast, policing that is locally knowledgeable, accessible and responsive, shows courtesy in interactions and preferably on foot, is appreciated in its actual or potential ability to forge affinities that are valued. My conclusion is that in Sweden, and arguably beyond, these contested distances and valorized affinities need to be understood within a neighborhood context in which stigmatization, socioeconomic deprivation and, for some, a sense of state neglect, are tangible. Under such circumstances, it is conceivable that policing that foregrounds community-affirming approaches would resonate better with respondents' neighborhood aspirations.

From a critical perspective, as mentioned above, strategies that aim to bridge the gap between the police and the policed, supposedly on behalf of the latter, may, unwittingly or not, bring about police expansionism or repressive demands that usually clamp down on society's weakest or most vulnerable (Loader, 2006; Akarsu, 2020; González & Mayka, 2023). Although it might be a limitation of this work, there is no clear pattern in the interviews that could be straightforwardly interpreted as ready acceptance of more, or more authoritarian, policing in the Stockholm suburbs studied here. Narratives that de-emphasize the police are often skeptical about letting the policing perspective invade the social sphere and become the main instrument in dealing with a multitude of neighborhood issues. This does not mean that social control, formal or informal, is insignificant for the respondents – quite the contrary, at least for some, particularly when it comes to their trepidations about youths. Yet, instead of showing a deliberate neglect for the routinely policed and their interests, such trepidations seem to reflect respondents' worries not just related to youth crime and victimization but also about police aggression.

It should be reiterated that adult perspectives might be relatively more favorable to policing and social control than those of the youth. Hence, it is plausible to read these results with some caution against this background. A similar note can be made about race and ethnicity. Focusing on the experiences of a specific minority group, or members of the ethnic majority only, might have generated results that could be somewhat divergent from the findings presented above. The picture may also vary in suburbs comparable to Grönort and Lillberg, let alone other regions of Sweden. Still, it is perfectly possible that the concerns and aspirations related to policing discussed in this paper are not unique to socially deprived suburbs alone. In the context of neighborhood disadvantage and stigmatization, however, concerns about alienating distances and valorization of affinities take on specific meanings that are hardly inextricable from the adversities of urban inequality that beset the everyday lives of the communities in these places.



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## Appendix

Following sources have been consulted for selected socioeconomic indicators.

Institution	Topic and data source
Statistics Sweden	<p>Household economy (incomes and income distribution)  <a href="https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/hushallens-ekonomi/inkomster-och-inkomstfordelning/inkomster-och-skatter/">https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/hushallens-ekonomi/inkomster-och-inkomstfordelning/inkomster-och-skatter/</a></p> <p>Education and research (educational attainment of the population)  <a href="https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/utbildning-och-forskning/befolkningens-utbildning/befolkningens-utbildning/#TabelleriStatistikdatabasen">https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/utbildning-och-forskning/befolkningens-utbildning/befolkningens-utbildning/#TabelleriStatistikdatabasen</a></p> <p>Population statistics (migration background)  <a href="https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/">https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/befolkning/befolkningens-sammansattning/befolkningsstatistik/</a></p>
Stockholm Municipality	<p>Facts about urban areas  <a href="https://start.stockholm/om-stockholms-stad/utredningar-statistik-och-fakta/statistik/omradesfakta/">https://start.stockholm/om-stockholms-stad/utredningar-statistik-och-fakta/statistik/omradesfakta/</a></p>
National Board of Health and Welfare	<p>Financial assistance  <a href="https://sdb.socialstyresen.se/if_ekb/val.aspx">https://sdb.socialstyresen.se/if_ekb/val.aspx</a></p>