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"Police took my homie I dedicate my life 2 his revenge": Twitter tensions between gang-involved youth and police in Chicago

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ABSTRACT

The hostile and adversarial relationship between youth and police in urban settings has remained pervasive and persistent for centuries. This is a tension historically rooted in the miasma of lack of trust; racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; and fear, anger, and hostility from racialized surveillance and policing. Indeed, most Black youth have little contact with police unless it involves harsh profiling and/or criminalization. In this article, we leverage the policing literature to examine how the perpetual detestation between urban youth and police is expressed in physical and digital contexts (e.g., Twitter). We find that urban youth, particularly gang-involved youth, publicly articulate their disdain for law enforcement agents on Twitter. The young people in our study expressed chronic grief and anger after the fatal police shooting of a Southside Chicago gang member. Further, they expressed a strong desire to violently retaliate against the Chicago Police Department after their friend was killed. In fact, users on Twitter frequently posted the hash tag #CPDK—an acronym for Chicago Police Department Killer—shortly after this incident. We discuss the implications of using Twitter data to inform policing practices, as well as early intervention and prevention strategies for youth living in inner cities.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, Jr., an 18-year-old Black male, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a White police officer who, at the time, was patrolling a predominantly Black neighborhood in Ferguson, Missouri (Coates, 2015; Roberts, 2015). As Brown's body laid unattended in the street for up to four hours, cell phone footage capturing critical moments following the police shooting was uploaded on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social network services (SNSs), eventually leading to a nationwide protest demanding justice for Brown and the hundreds of other youth who are victims of police brutality every day (Prusaczyk, Ravindranath, Davis, & Sewell, 2014).

The relative low cost of smartphones, emergence of social media and SNSs, and increased technological literacy has created new opportunities for everyday citizens to capture aggressive policing and other injustices that are borne disproportionately by people of color across the United States (Moule, Pyrooz, & Decker, 2013; Yar, 2012). Now, more than ever, community members are able to swiftly capture youth-police interactions on their mobile devices in real time and instantly upload and share content with others online. Concomitantly, social media sites have created a unique and safe space for diverse users to coalesce and engage in critical discourse regarding the tenuous and, in many cases, deadly interactions

between young people of color and the police in their respective cities (Bora, Zaytsev, Chang, & Maheswaran, 2013; Hagan, Shedd, & Payne, 2005).

In this study we ask: How is disdain for police communicated on Twitter by urban, gang-involved youth following the police shooting of one of their fellow gang members? To further examine this question, we studied the Twitter communication of Gakirah Barnes, a recently deceased 17-year-old self-proclaimed gang member from Chicago, Illinois, as she publicly articulated her disdain for police following the fatal police shooting of her close friend Raason Shaw (Swaine, 2014). We use inductive textual analysis to analyze the communications of Gakirah and users with whom she frequently communicated on Twitter, which provides an in-depth and nuanced contextual and linguistic perspective of how urban youth respond to police in their neighborhood following this traumatic event.

Literature review

Prior research on youths' experience with police in urban neighborhoods suggests that aggressive policing of urban youth correlates with their having low trust in adults in authoritative roles, negative relationships with police, and feeling unwelcome in public spaces (Borrero, 2001; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Carr, Napolitano, & Keating, 2007; Fine et al., 2003). However, we argue that there is an important distinction between research that examines aggressive policing and our current challenges with police in urban communities intricately connected to ubiquitous social media consumption and use. Social media has changed the ways we access news and provides immediate notification of the social ills that plague marginalized communities—including aggressive policing. Social media also provides an outlet for individuals who live in marginalized urban communities to express the pain, frustrations, and contempt of negative relationships with police in their neighborhoods. Therefore, for youth who are born digital, the boundaries that theoretically exist between what happens online and in one's neighborhood are often nonexistent (Bora et al., 2013; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008).

Data show that youth, specifically Black youth and individuals who are gang involved, may live and narrate their lives on social media. In a study of outreach workers in five metropolitan areas, Decker and Pyrooz (2011) found that current and former gang members are highly active on the Internet and frequently navigate SNSs. Data from the Pew Research Center suggest that 73% of Black Internet users have some form of social media presence, and 96% of users 18–29 years of age are active on at least one social media platform. Twitter is a social media platform that is popular among Black youth and young adults. In fact, 22% of Black youth and young adults online use Twitter versus 16% of online Whites. Black youth and young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are particularly active on Twitter with 40% using the site versus 28% of White users in the same age cohort (Smith, 2014).

Youths' anywhere-anytime engagement with social media suggests that youth who experience aggressive policing in their neighborhood may use social media platforms to talk about these experiences, as well as connect to a broader community who can share or sympathize with their lived experience. However, little to no empirical research has examined how urban youth respond on Twitter to perceived aggressive policing in their neighborhood.

Neighborhood relationships with the police

In the post–Civil Rights era, the hyper-policed ghetto and massive, ever expanding prison system have become increasingly indistinguishable, reinforcing in each other the marginalization and exclusion of Black men and women (Nuño, 2013; Rios, 2006; Wacquant, 2001). The resulting symbiosis between ghetto and prison creates a system of racial control that perpetuates socio-economic marginality. The result is punitive social and institutional structures replacing the social welfare treatment of poverty by penal management (Alexander, 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Rios, 2006; Wacquant, 2001)—a phenomenon often called the Prison Industrial Complex, school-to-prison

pipeline, or cradle-to-prison pipeline. As a result of these oppressive social and institutional structures, youth of color living in disadvantaged communities often have few civil rights and are at high risk of experiencing direct or indirect contact with police because of the aggressive crime-control strategies to which they are exposed (Borrero, 2001; Brunson, 2007; Brunson & Miller, 2006; Carr et al., 2007; Rios, 2006), including being the routine subjects of police surveillance and harassment (Fine et al., 2003; Kerr & Stattin, 2000). In some instances, these investigatory stops can lead to violent and lethal police force. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention compiled data showing people of color are most likely to be killed by police overall (Patton et al., 2014), and a report issued by Malcolm X Grassroots movement found that a Black man was killed every 28 hours in 2012 (Akuno & Eisen, 2013).

Recent research on police surveillance of youth in public spaces suggests that urban youth, especially low-income youth of color, are being systematically surveilled and exposed to constant scrutiny and threat of criminalization (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Leman-Langlois, 2008; Yar, 2012). Several researchers have found that violent, targeted enforcement in neighborhoods may diminish trust in police and lead to consistent negative appraisals of police (Brunson, 2007; Crank, 1990; Neely & Cleveland, 2011; Prenzler, Porter, & Alpert, 2013).

Adult attitudes and unwarranted aggressive neighborhood policing practices have made youth of color increasingly mistrustful and vulnerable as once safe schools, neighborhoods, and communities turn into hostile and threatening spaces. Through a street survey of 911 New York youths, Fine et al. (2003), found that Black and Latino males have the highest rates of adverse interactions and mistrust of the police and feel least safe in the city. The young people surveyed reported that the cumulative impact of adverse interactions with police, security guards, teachers, and store staff made them feel unwelcome in public spaces. Because of this developed mistrust, marginalized youth of color become increasingly unwilling to seek assistance from adults and can become further disconnected from positive networks of support (Brendtro and Brokenleg, 2002; Rios, 2011). Through these experiences, youth can feel disillusioned and resign to processing, grieving, and venting the associated trauma in their lives on SNSs (Christopherson, 2007; Martin, Coyier, VanSistine, & Schroeder, 2013).

Social media crime and violence

Youth of color use SNSs to express themselves, to socialize with their peers and to make sense of and help build the culture around them (Moreno and Whitehill, 2012; Moule et al., 2013). A major part of their daily lived experience is frequent police surveillance both on and offline (Borrero, 2001; Brunson and Miller, 2006; Myers & Thompson, 2000; Patton, Eschmann, & Butler, 2013; Trottier, 2012). Social media is particularly important because it allows youth to self-reflect and garner respect from a wider audience. The unique property of an invisible audience platform of their peers affects the ways in which youth interact (Boyd, 2007; Christopherson, 2007). More specifically, it gives them a public space to seek love and positive recognition, a reinforcement of self they receive in few other places where they are negatively surveilled and habitually suspected of wrongdoing by authority figures (Leary, 2001; Patton et al., 2013).

As public spaces become increasingly surveilled, gang-affiliated youth have moved their illicit activities to SNSs. They express this control by maintaining threatening public presences and by engaging in violent or criminal activity. Gang members often express themselves online by sharing provocative, threatening, and intimidating messages publicly on social media (Bora et al., 2013; Moule et al., 2013), a burgeoning phenomenon termed *Internet banging* (Patton et al., 2013). According to a survey, 74% of the gang members who participated identified themselves as frequent Internet users and had established an online presence to gain respect for their gang (King, Walpole, & Lamon, 2007). This high percentage of Internet use is surprising, given the illicit activity and negative connotations gangs are often affiliated with. Rather than finding public places where like-minded young gang members can congregate, they instead exhibit a preference for online public places (e.g., Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube) to express their affiliation, to sell drugs, and to

publicize illegal activities (Ito et al., 2010). Several of them are completely unaware that police are observing their social media interactions at all (Chomos & Miller, 2015; Spizman & Miller, 2013), and police departments capitalize on these youths' naivety, spending thousands of dollars on unregulated, comprehensive social networking site data collection systems to monitor youth.

Police surveillance

Surveillance of youth, particularly youth of color, in schools and communities appears to be on the rise (Fine et al., 2003; Fuchs, 2015). More recently, police departments (PDs) are increasing their presence on SNSs to obtain more information on youth suspected of criminal involvement. Currently more than 75% of the 61 largest police departments in the United States have a presence on at least one of the three major SNSs, including Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace (Lieberman, Koetzle, & Sakiyama, 2013). Given the publicly available nature of this information, the police often do not even need a search warrant, subpoena, or court order to obtain social media evidence. In addition to searching for publicly available evidence, police evade the privacy settings of a person's social media account by creating fictitious online accounts and identities that grant them access to more personal and intimate information (Fontecilla, 2015; Lyon, 2002; Trottier, 2012).

Though gang involvement is not yet a crime, for decades, law enforcement has dedicated substantial resources to collecting personal information about youth suspected of such involvement (Wright, 2005). Surveillance of urban youth has been exacerbated with the advent of smartphones and the proliferation of social media platforms that allow them to express their authentic emotions as they navigate their communities. Now, highly advanced software platforms are able to aggregate and organize personal information such as a youth's name, address, typical dress, school location, behaviors, histories, friends, and locations typically frequented. This means that prior to a conviction, youth can be placed into databases and subject to high levels of surveillance, scrutiny, and frequent police encounters (Klein, 2009). Simply displaying a common hand symbol, favorite hip-hop artist, or colors tied to a gang faction can be evidence of gang involvement and warrant inclusion on gang databases (Jacobs, 2009).

Social networking site surveillance by police is extremely disconcerting, given that most youth are completely unaware that police and other governmental institutions have access to their accounts (Marwick, 2011; Raynes-Goldie, 2010) or that certain posts can lead to time being spent in prison. The process of compiling youth social networking data reveals the flawed usage of SNSs by police solely as mechanisms to find incriminating evidence. It begs the question why more literature is not being produced to inform and reform the practice of police using complied social networking site evidence as an entrance into the juvenile justice system (Lapp, 2015).

Gap in the literature

The literature tell us that aggressive policing is not a new phenomenon in urban neighborhoods and that youth, particularly youth of color, are disproportionately impacted by egregious forms of policing (Alexander, 2012; Borrero, 2001; Rios, 2006). Immediate access to technology makes it easier to identify and discuss forms and functions of aggressive policing, but our empirical work in this area has lagged behind our technology use (Moule et al., 2013; Prusaczyk et al., 2014; Yar, 2012). Absent in the literature and preventive practice is a thorough exploration and synthesis of how social media sites provide a different and new medium where youth can bare honest and transparent reactions to their interactions with police and the associated trauma surrounding those events.

Not only have researchers neglected to study social media communications, but there is an overall dearth of research exploring the narratives of residents themselves expressed on social media. Only recently have researchers attempted to document police legitimacy within minority communities or policing in general by collecting the narratives of minority residents themselves (Hinds & Murphy, 2007; Tyler, 2004). The police legitimacy literature infrequently acknowledges the countless

experiences of inner-city individuals and neighborhoods that inform residents' conclusion that officers' authority should not be unquestionably accepted (Armaline, Sanchez, & Correia, 2014). In fact, recent research on police legitimacy has found that narratives from the residents themselves often conflict with romanticized expectations and descriptions of police legitimacy. These are the empirical and theoretical chasms that our research seeks to address, both in theory and in practice.

Methods

Studies that examine Twitter content typically examine millions of data points. However, to best examine how disdain for police is communicated on Twitter, we take an inductive qualitative approach, a textual analysis, to examine a relatively small subset of Twitter. We chose this method for several reasons. First, we are analyzing communications between urban gang involved youth who possess a unique style of communication that combines elements of Black vernacular English, language that is unique to their gang faction, and linguistic variation that is common on social media (e.g., shortened words, emojis). The language represented in these tweets exhibited significant sociolinguistic variation from "standard" English, the use of which represents a critical part of how urban youth construct their identity (Alim, 2004). Second, computational software often utilizes traditional keyword searches to analyze social media data, an approach that has been deemed inadequate by local law enforcement agencies studying the online communications of urban youth and gang members (Geofeedia, 2012).

To increase our chances of accurately deciphering the language, we engaged in a two-step process: (1) assembling a multidisciplinary team of researchers who have experience and expertise studying urban-based youth violence and cyber-bullying, and (2) interviewing gang-involved youth in the city of Chicago. Researchers designed a systematic process of team-based code development, textual analysis, and rigorous reconciliation that included weekly team consultations and ongoing collaboration until themes were clearly defined. To confirm the validity and reliability of these themes, we identified and trained two gang-involved youth from Chicago (one Black and one Latino), who are current participants in the Youth Violence and Prevention Program at the YMCA of Metro Chicago.

Twitter's personal-communication mechanisms

While Twitter is foremost a microblogging platform where users subscribe to messages by following other users, it does have mechanisms for targeted communications. Users can reply by starting a post with @ and the recipient's Twitter name or they can mention another user by placing that user's Twitter name (prepended with @) at another position in the post. Mentions are received by the sender's followers and viewed in the receiver's private "Mentions and Notifications Tab." Replies are received only by followers of both sender and receiver.

Twitter also allows users to *retweet*—to quote or repost another user's tweet. Typically a retweet begins with the characters *RT* and the handle of the user who made the original post. However, retweets are structured in many ways by third-party applications that use the Twitter Application Program Interface; recently Twitter has implemented *native retweeting*, a retweet that requires no special formatting. This diversity of retweet structure occasionally creates difficulty in distinguishing retweets from other kinds of posts.

Obtaining and coding @tyquanassassin Twitter posts

Tweets in this dataset use unique linguistic styles with distinct words, phrases, grammatical constructions, and slang references to neighborhood identities, rival gangs, and local music. Given linguistic variation by city regions and gang factions, these tweets would be difficult to decipher using automated scripts, network analysis tools, or crowdsourcing. This rich, complex communication required a robust case-study approach deeply examining conditions and factors that explicate

how urban youth communicate on Twitter. The social scientists, with years of experience conducting qualitative research with youth of color in urban areas, debated whether to anonymize Twitter handles in academic research. We use real handles and names here, because Gakirah and her online presence has been covered extensively in mainstream news sources; we do, however, anonymize her followers' handles.

Tweets obtained using Radian6 lacked accurate representation of emoji used in original tweets. Often we retrieved original tweets with accurate emoji from the Twitter website by following links Radian6 provided for each tweet. Occasionally the original tweet had been removed from Twitter. In these latter cases, we present tweets without emoji.

Data collection

We collected a set of tweets that represented personal Twitter communications with "tyquanassassin": First, we used Radian6, a social-media tracking service, to obtain all tweets posted by @tyquanassassin or containing "tyquanassassin" in the tweet between March 29 and April 17, 2014. We chose this time period because it captured two critical trauma events and reactions: the death of Gakirah's friend Lil B (the individual allegedly killed by Chicago police) and the death of Gakirah. This was designed to capture all @tyquanassassin's tweets, all mentions and replies directed toward @tyquanassassin, and retweets of @tyquanassassin's tweets. Thus we collected data on how Gakirah and followers in her network responded to Lil B's death and how Gakirah's network responded to her death.

During this process we collected 408 tweets posted by Gakirah or tweets containing her @tyquanassassin Twitter handle. The content of those tweets ranged from acts of violence, direct threats, conversations around relationships, friends, the city of Chicago, and drug-related posts. Out of the 408 tweets identified during this time period, 27 tweets directly referenced the Chicago Police Department or law enforcement broadly. Because @tyquanassassin's tweets were retweeted by many users, and we did not consider retweets part of personal communication with @tyquanassassin, we filtered retweets from this set using common retweet formats (e.g., tweets beginning with RT), also removing advertisements or promotions for music albums and videos. For this study, we then reexamined the 408 tweets to identify communications that directly mention the police or use the hash tag #cpdk. During this process we identified 27 posts that we describe in the results section and Table 1.

Most frequent communicators identified

We also wanted to understand Gakirah's peer network and those with whom she communicated on Twitter. We identified Twitter handles communicating most frequently with the @tyquanassassin handle by first obtaining all tweets by all Twitter users from January 14 to April 17, 2014, containing the string "tyquanassassin." We excluded tweets sent by @tyquanassassin, and after retweets were filtered, this set captured all mentions and replies directed towards @tyquanassassin. Using number of replies to, and mentions of, as proxy measure of personal interaction and communication with @tyquanassassin, we identified her top five communicators during this period. We chose five communicators because we wanted to learn more about the individuals she was most communicative with on Twitter because we believe that insight from the top five communicators could provide a more in-depth understanding of Gakirah, her neighborhoods, her interactions, and her peer network. For each top communicator, we used the same procedure (obtain all tweets posted by the communicator's handle or containing the handle in the post) and filtered out retweets from this set to obtain all tweets for the period ranging from April 3–17, 2014, one week before Gakirah's death to one week after. We obtained 2,142 tweets, mentions, and replies for analysis.

Table 1. Examples of Twitter posts.

Type of tweet	Example of tweet
Grief	Police took folkz out dis shyt it's crazy man
	Police Dan took our boy man 10 year nigga dis shyt so Krazy man
	Da Police Took My mf nigga man
	Why da police have 2 kill my Broski
	DA POLICE TOOK MY BLOOD
	Da pain unbearable
Plans for retaliation	ain't no shootaz wit me I Keep killaz wit me cpdk rip blood
	Police took my homie I dedicate my life 2 his revenge
	DA Police I'd kill u Faster Dan niggaz on Da Corner Rip King Lil B CPDK
	I'm frm where if dey send shotz we send Em back we never gave af if it was da police
	@TyquanAssassin: How do we take dis do we drop a cop like he a opp c'mon y'all pay attention Lil b I'd do it for us
	@TyquanAssassin yall should just do a drill on 12 cpdk
	@TyquanAssassin y'all gone have the swat in the city if y'all go to war with CPD
Perception of police behavior	Da police think I run dis shyt dey say I'm da enforcer shyt dese goofys ain't runnin under me ´
	@bricksquadmain ima hyl police be watching my shyt delete dat killa
	@DutchieDntSHOOT u kno wen Mf pop out we show out jakes got Dis bitch on lock doe
	CPD all ova Me like Snoop u running Dis I'm like Ima Die a Real nigga
Questioning police legitimacy	Da police knew about bro dey wasn't comin 2 arrest dey came 2 kill cuzo ain't have dat robot dey did my nigga dirty cpdk call dis Shyt WAR
	Rip lil b this cracra cpdk they trying to take the rest of EBT thats left shit real time to turn up ten nouches
	Datz my blood left my nigga n cold blood
	@TyquanAssassin cpd gonna say he pointed a gun. hows that if he got shot in the back 7 times #cpdk
	It's bout 2 be a riot
	CPD killed my Broski raason treated Em like he wasn't
Enmity between youth and police	Cpdk middle fingerz 2 da law
	Lil B CPDK Middle Fingaz 2 da Law
	Pigs jst took lil b out dis shyt but its Gucci it only get worser now
	@freekyworld_hh: Fuck 12 always fuckin wit a niggaâ

Data analysis

In the first step of our analysis, the data scientists and qualitative researchers developed the coding scheme and coded the collected Twitter results, checking the accuracy of one another's coding (Ford, 2014). During this process we identified several preliminary codes including but not limited to grief, threat, police, drugs, and relationships. The qualitative researchers gained unique insights on the use of Twitter as an analytic tool for social work research. The data scientists developed and executed automated computer tools for gathering and filtering datasets from Twitter, analyzing communication patterns, and presenting the tweets in a suitable form for content analysis by the qualitative researchers. In addition, the data scientists benefited from more qualitative insights into the mechanisms of gang violence that may occur on Twitter.

We chose to have every tweet coded by three coders with diverse educational and cultural backgrounds and experiences. Three coders trained in qualitative methods utilized an inductive textual analysis to uncover the main content areas exhibited in this dataset, discussed codes iteratively to reconcile differences, and developed a codebook representing content areas. The coders used the codebook to independently code the tweets. We held reconciliation meetings where coders discussed and explained their codes and the meaning of each tweet when there were disagreements.

Next, we isolated the police code to further examine and identify any emergent themes that may explain how aggression is communicated on Twitter. The police code was defined as: descriptions of posts that include mentions of police or the hash tag #cpd (Chicago Police Department) or #cpdk (Chicago Police Department Killer). We identified 27 posts between Gakirah and her top correspondents that directly described how they felt about Chicago police directly following the alleged murder of Raason Shaw.

After identifying and analyzing the 27 Twitter posts, we connected with the YMCA Chicago Youth Violence Prevention Program in an effort to identify youth who would be willing to review our interpretations of the results. The YMCA identified two adolescent boys, one Black and the other Latino, who self-identified as gang involved, to review our interpretations of the Twitter posts. The youth were asked to first review our qualitative interpretations of the 27 posts and indicate whether they agreed with our interpretations by stating yes or no. In cases where our interpretations may not have been accurate, we asked the youth to describe their interpretation of the Twitter post. We had 93% agreement on the Twitter posts across both youth.

Results

We found that Gakirah and users in her Twitter network communicated feelings of disdain for police in three ways following the police shooting of Raason Shaw: (1) grief, anger, and plans for retaliation; (2) negative perceptions of police behavior and legitimacy; and (3) distrust and antipathy toward police. See Table 1 for a complete list of these tweets.

Grief, anger, and plans for retaliation

On Friday, April 3, 2014, at 2:10 A.M. Gakirah tweeted "Da Police I'd kill u Faster Dan niggaz on Da Corner Rip King Lil B CPDK." In this post, Gakirah threatens the police by expressing her ability to effortlessly harm police officers "faster" than rival gang members "on Da Corner." The tweet ends with "RIP King Lil B," to memorialize and apprise her audience of her respect for Raason (also known as "Lil B"). Her reference to CPDK, meaning Chicago Police Department Killer, is a popular acronym among gang-involved youth living in Chicago who have been exposed to routine police violence and often view authorities as the "opps," or opposition, another violent, threatening force to their individual and/or group survival. Interestingly, similar language is used when gang members refer to rival factions (i.e., BDK: Black Disciple Killer). See Figure 1.

On Friday, April 3, at 3:41 A.M., an hour after her retaliatory message directed at police, Gakirah tweeted a message describing her emotional experience coping with the unanticipated loss of Raason: "Da pain unbearable." And a day later, she searches for meaning: "Why da police have 2 kill my Broski [?]"

These posts visibly expressed her sad emotional state through the use of frowning emoji, indicating that Gakirah was mourning the loss of Raason—whom she affectionately called her "Broski" or brother—as she continued to yearn for answers and accept a new social reality. The tweets were also posted in the late evening or early morning, suggesting that Gakirah was frequently experiencing intense emotions and turning to Twitter as an outlet to express these feelings at all hours. See Figure 2.

Figure 1. Example 1.

Figure 2. Example 2.

Figure 3. Example 3.

Posts that described how one should react when threatened, challenged, and/or experiencing an injustice often followed direct threats. Gakirah wrote "I'm frm where if dey send shotz we send Em back we never gave af if it was da police." This implies an eye-for-an-eye mentality, or that individuals who harm or threaten others should be penalized to a similar degree. In this case, victims of violence have an obligation to confront perpetrators and seek revenge through similar violent means, even if this means harming authorities. To that end, Gakirah's most retweeted post among the tweets analyzed in this study described her loyalty to Raason and firm commitment to seeking justice for his death. Just a day before Gakirah was fatally shot she tweeted: "Police took my homie I dedicate my life 2 his revenge." This was retweeted to more than 53 Twitter users, and 25 users marked it as one of their "favorites" on Twitter. From our conversations with gang-involved youth in Chicago, we learned that Gakirah was seeking to avenge the death of Raason by targeting police involved in the shooting. See Figure 3.

Negative perceptions of police behavior and legitimacy

Gakirah questioned the motive behind the police shooting of Raason, writing "Da police knew about bro dey wasn't comin 2 arrest dey came 2 kill cuzo ain't have dat robot dey did my nigga dirty cpdk call dis Shyt WAR." In this post, Gakirah suggests that the police knew of Raason and came with the intent to kill him. Gakirah uses CPDK as an expression of violence against the police and declares "war" to correct what she perceives as an unjust killing of her friend. Gakirah's Twitter followers supported her claims and also questioned the intent of police. A Twitter user used @ to mention Gakirah in a post saying "cpd gonna say he pointed a gun. hows that if he got shot in the back 7 times." See Figure 4.

Gakirah also expressed a keen awareness of police behavior and questioned the legitimacy of police officers and their authority in the neighborhood. On April 6, 2014, Gakirah responded to a friend's message saying "hyl [help you later] police be watching my shyt delete dat killa." Gakirah believed that police were lurking on her Twitter account and that some level of

Figure 4. Example 4.

censorship was needed to limit information made available to police. Gakirah was also aware of police surveillance in her community. During a Twitter conversation with one of her friends, she said "u kno wen Mf pop out we show out jakes got Dis bitch on lock doe." In this post, "jakes got Dis bitch on lock" refers to police having a presence in the community, which may have shifted or altered gang activity and how Gakirah and her peers navigated both physical and digital spaces.

Distrust and antipathy toward police

Gakirah's posts indicate that there was strong distrust and hostility between her and law enforcement. See Figure 5. She directly expressed her animosity toward the Chicago Police Department by posting "CPDK middle fingerz 2 da law" and days later, retweeted a message from a Twitter user she was following that read: "Fuck 12 always fuckin wit a nigga." Exacerbating this tension was Gakirah's belief that the fatal shooting of Raason was a deliberate attack against the EBT gang and its affiliates. She writes, "Rip lil b this cracra cpdk they trying to take the rest of EBT thats left shit real time to turn up ten nouches." In this post, Gakirah believes the Chicago Police Department was trying to disband her gang and in response felt that her crew should "turn up ten nouches." Therefore, she felt it was important for the gang to come together to confront the Chicago Police Department and even hinted of impending conflict by saying "Pigs [police] jst took lil b out dis shyt but its Gucci it only gets worser now." It is evident that the police shooting of Raason altered Gakirah's perception of safety, protection, and the role of law enforcement in her community. This sentiment led to a vicious and pervasive cycle that preserved hostility between Gakirah's Twitter network and law enforcement throughout the study.
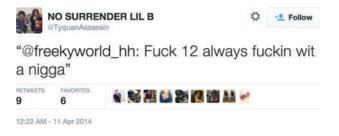

Figure 5. Example 5.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to examine how disdain for police was communicated on Twitter by urban, gang-involved youth. Our results indicate three prevalent themes among the analyzed online postings, which included (1) grief, anger, and plans for retaliation, (2) negative perceptions of police behavior and legitimacy, and (3) distrust and antipathy toward police. These findings are consistent with recent literature on urban policing, which suggests that urban youth of color are surveilled and policed more aggressively than those in other communities (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Leman-Langlois, 2008; Yar, 2012), leading these youths to develop more negative perceptions of, and relationships with, law enforcement officials (Fine et al., 2003). Additionally, these youths often have greater contact with police and experience higher levels of police crime-control tactics (Brunson, 2007), which also impacts their perception. Several studies support the notion that negative police-related perceptions and feelings (i.e., anger, animosity) are not at all arbitrary, but are rather the result of the severe and violent policing that regularly occurs in urban communities of color across the United States (Brunson, 2007; Crank, 1990; Neely & Cleveland, 2011; Prenzler et al., 2013). In the context of this study, such policing allegedly resulted in the death of one young person of color, Raason, similar to the many other people of color who have been killed by police across the United States. Our results support the literature, illustrating how these experiences impact not only the emotional well-being of youth, but also their perception of and general disposition toward law enforcement.

Similar to the findings of Fine et al. (2003), our results also demonstrate that these youth feel unsafe, lacking in overall trust and belief in the integrity of police officials. Twitter posts highlighted youth suspicions about being surveilled and even intentionally killed by police officers. This, as Fine et al. (2003) suggest, along with negative interactions with authority figures in other contexts (e.g., school, neighborhood store), can greatly impair youths' ability to feel safe and welcomed in their own community. For example, schools often become another hostile environment for youth in urban neighborhoods, where similar aggressive behavioral interventions are used to keep students safe (Miller, 2014; Wacquant, 2001) but are instead perceived as threatening. Without robust supports to help youth navigate these ubiquitous threats, they may continue to feel distrust toward their environment and resent the authority figures (i.e., police officers) that support the maintenance of these punitive systems.

Our results also show that gang-involved youth who experience perceived aggressive policing in their neighborhoods are not only willing to publicly talk about their feelings toward police and their own emotional state following the death of friend but may also make direct threats toward the very police they feel are responsible for the death. The "Plans for Retaliation" theme displays this desire for retribution by youths for the perceived injustices taking place at the hands of police. This is not completely unexpected, given the aforementioned findings on negative youth emotions and perceptions of law enforcement. Such strong feelings of anger and vengeance demonstrate their desire for justice and retribution, even through aggressive means, and may be indicative of possible imminent violence or other risk-taking behaviors. However, this may also be a form of harmless expression to cope with the overwhelming emotional strain and trauma resulting from feelings of grief, discrimination, and oppression. Regardless, this theme demonstrates the widening chasm between law enforcement officials and the individuals that they are charged with protecting in urban neighborhoods.

Furthermore, the varied ways in which the gang-involved youth in this study communicate on Twitter is in need of further inquiry to explore why youth are willing to discuss deeply personal emotions and make incriminating remarks that can be seen by multiple audiences. Perhaps a relevant concept in addressing this inquiry is what Marwick and Boyd (2011) call the *audience invoked* or rather the idea that Twitter users have a particular audience in mind when writing a post. Our results show that gang-involved urban youth are speaking directly to police and to each other. In this way, youth in our study negotiated how to effectively communicate between multiple audiences, expressing their disdain to

police while also rallying support from their peers. Understanding the powerful vehicles for expression that SNSs have become and the unique insights that they can provide, future research might explore the ways social media can be used to enhance and further develop culturally attuned, community-based policing in a digital age.

Implications

These themes urgently highlight a need among youth in this population, which social work professionals are uniquely equipped to meet. For social workers in practice and policy, this may mean becoming more aware of SNSs, how they are utilized by youth, and how they can be leveraged as a tool for advocating for disadvantaged populations. SNSs provide an ever-growing forum for youth expression and our findings clearly illustrate how youth are utilizing social media to provide commentary that may even be deemed as socially adversarial. Literature has discussed how youth of color often use SNSs to express their emotions and to make sense of their environmental and cultural context (Moreno & Whitehill, 2012), and our results also display the possibility of using SNS data to inform our knowledge of youth feelings and perceptions related to policing practices. Therefore, emerging forms of effective social work practice to address issues of oppression, marginalization, and trauma may benefit from some level of SNS usage.

Social work professionals can utilize social media outlets as both a prevention and intervention tool as they attempt to engage youth. This is especially important for practitioners working with youth of color, who may be reticent to share their thoughts with authority figures and whose voices are so often ignored in the mainstream narrative. Prevention and intervention practice strategies might include clinical or school social workers inviting youth to share and process their SNS posts during therapy or counseling sessions. It might also be useful for practitioners, especially those in child-serving systems (e.g., schools, community agencies) to explore the use of SNSs as an organized forum for youth to share their perspectives, comment on and process difficult social and community-related problems, and receive positive guidance in dealing with such issues. This may serve to prevent youth from employing maladaptive responses to community problems, while also providing methods for coping and socioemotional support for youth currently engaged in negative coping behaviors.

Social work professionals engaged in policy work can utilize SNSs to work toward improving relationships between law enforcement and communities of color. They can use SNSs to publicly advocate for reforming police policy and practice, as well as alternatives to discriminatory surveillance and other policing practices that exacerbate youths' perceptions of police. Utilizing social media as a platform for such advocacy provides social workers with a more youth-friendly medium for garnering youth voice, support, and investment. It also provides a wider audience, quicker dissemination of information, and greater opportunities to organize around issues relevant to improving the experiences of youth in these communities.

Strengths and limitations

As a major strength, this study is among the first to use Twitter data to capture the police-related perceptions of youth of color. However, this study is not without limitations. Our data come from a self-identified female gang member and a few of her most frequent communicators on Twitter. As such, our results cannot be generalized outside of our data set. Although intentional, our analysis focused on posts following a traumatic experience, the loss of a loved one. As such, studying Twitter data during ordinary everyday interactions may not necessarily yield the same results. Third, our sample is small, and data are cross-sectional and may be given to human error in interpretation of the Twitter posts. However, we believe that focusing on a small subset of Twitter posts from a small group of people allowed us to take a more robust and in-depth approach that would be necessary when analyzing complex and nuanced language on Twitter. Future studies should explore SNS

postings from non-gang-affiliated youth of color, youth SNS postings over time, and across other forms of social media to gather a wider range of youth perspectives. Research should also investigate ways to effectively utilize SNSs to strengthen social work practice.

Conclusion

The strongest statement that can be made is the statement of self; the *I am*. Our research demonstrates that for urban youth of color, these statements tend to be reactive, predicated responses to external punitive actions, traumatic experiences, and assumptions that challenge and call into question their very right to be. Intimidated and surveilled out of their physical spaces, urban youth of color have taken this performance of self online in an attempt to assert their identities and reclaim their agency. That these performances, on the surface, tend to be emotional and anti-establishment is what Rios (2011) refers to as *deviant politics*—a resistant, often deviant performance of self in response to the ubiquitous persecution and surveillance that dominates their existence. The challenge now is to redetermine the boundaries between surveillance and intelligence, between self-expression and intent, and between the punitive and the rehabilitative.

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