Social Problems, 2022, **00**, 1–18
https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spac043

"We Got Witnesses" Black Women's Counter-Surveillance for Navigating Police Violence and Legal Estrangement

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ABSTRACT

Police violence shapes the lives of racial and ethnic minorities, and while much has been written about strategic responses to police, missing is an examination of how black women navigate interactions with officers. Based on 32 interviews with black women, we find that they use witnessing, or the mobilization of others as observers to police encounters. Research demonstrates the rising role of videos and smartphones in documenting encounters with officers. We find that black women adapt witnessing techniques based on their surroundings, available resources, and network contacts. Three forms of witnessing are observed: *physical witnessing*, mobilizing others in close proximity to interactions with officers; *virtual witnessing*, using cellphone or social media technology to contact others or record interactions with officers; and *institutional witnessing*, leveraging police or other institutional contacts as interveners to interactions with officers. Black women mobilize witnessing to deescalate violence, gather evidence, and promote accountability. Attuned to both the interactional and structural dynamics of police encounters, black women conceptualize witnessing as a way to survive police encounters and navigate their legal estrangement within the carceral system. We theorize black women's witnessing as a form of resistance as they work to reconfigure short- and long-term power relations between themselves, their communities, and police.

KEYWORDS: black women; black feminist criminology; police violence; surveillance; legal estrangement.

Black witnessing, or the use of counter-surveillance measures to resist state violence, has historically allowed black journalists and activists to document and disseminate information about cases of violence unreported by mainstream presses (Richardson 2020). From Ida B. Wells' systemic documentation of white mob lynchings in the late 1800s to Darnella Frazier's 2020 recording of George Floyd's

We are grateful to Sarah Brayne for her feedback on this manuscript, as well as the faculty and students in the Crime, Law, and Deviance and Fem(me) Seminar Working Groups. We would also like to acknowledge and thank the black women in this study who took time to share their experiences. Finally, we wish to thank the anonymous reviewers and editors of the journal who provided very critical, thoughtful, and engaged feedback. This research was supported by the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship under Grant No. DGE-1610403, Ford Foundation, and the Horowitz Foundation for Social Policy. Please direct correspondence to the first author at 155 Pauli Murray Hall, CB #3210, The Department of Sociology, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3210; email: sgonzalez@unc.edu.

murder, which sparked international protests against police violence, black women have occupied the role of witness for others experiencing state violence (Cooper 2020; Richardson 2020; Wells 2014).

Yet some black women may also use witnessing to protect *themselves* from police, as illustrated by Sandra Bland's recordings of her own police encounter. When pulled over for a minor traffic violation in Waller County, Texas, Sandra Bland took out her cell phone and told the officer she had a "right to record" (Goodwyn 2019). After Sandra Bland's death in jail, her phone's footage became contested evidence in public debates about whether the officer used excessive force (Montgomery 2019).

Prior research illustrates how cop-watcher community groups (Bock 2016), journalists (Richardson 2020), nonprofit organizations (Elassar 2020; Stanley 2015), and even police agencies (Sandhu and Haggerty 2016) use counter-surveillance measures to document police contact. To date, however, there is limited research on how black women use counter-surveillance strategies to respond to their own risk of police violence. In this paper, we explore how black women conceptualize witnessing as a strategic response for navigating police contact and preventing police violence.

How individuals and communities adapt to the threat of police contact and violence elucidates the relationship between social structures and interactions, particularly the ways policing reproduces race, gender, sexuality, and class inequality in everyday life (Alexander 2012; Bell 2016; Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel 2014; Jones 2009; Lindsey 2022; Powell and Phelps 2021; Rios 2011; Robinson 2020; Stuart and Benezra 2018). More specifically, how black persons and communities work to protect themselves and others from police violence is a highly gendered process, from family socialization about vulnerability to police contact (Armstrong and Carlson 2019; Dow 2016; Elliot and Reid 2019; Malone Gonzalez 2019; Turner 2020), to street-level responses to patrol officers (Anderson 2000; Jones 2009; Powell and Phelps 2021; Rios 2011; Rios, Prieto, and Ibarra 2020; Stuart and Benezra 2018), to interactions with prison and parole officers during and after incarceration (Haley 2013; Hannah-Moffet 2004; Richie 2012; Ritchie 2017).

For black women, navigating police contact not only involves the risk of police violence, but their broader legal estrangement. Monica Bell (2017:2083) defines *legal estrangement* as "a marginal and ambivalent relationship with society, the law, and predominant social norms that emanates from institutional and legal failure." Black feminist criminology notes that these institutional and legal failures shape how black women experience policing, particularly through the ways they are targeted, delegitimized, and criminalized as victims of violence (Crenshaw 1991; Hitchens, Carr, and Campet-Lundquist 2018; Jones 2009; Potter 2006; Richie 2012; Ritchie 2016, 2017). Therefore, the strategies black women adopt for interactions with officers illuminate how marginality shapes the experience of policing.

In this paper, we draw from 32 interviews with black women to investigate how they discuss mobilizing witnessing during police contact. We find these black women use witnessing as a strategic response to protect themselves from police violence and to navigate their broader legal estrangement, as a way to promote immediate safety in interactions and longer-term accountability for police. Building on research of black women's witnessing as a form of resistance, we analyze how they strategically assess their risk of police violence and adapt witnessing techniques based on their surroundings, resources, and social contacts. We conclude by calling for broader conceptualizations of police encounters that include preparation, contact, and post-contact advocacy as illustrated by black women's witnessing labor. Further, we discuss the potential impact of this expanded understanding of encounters for black women's health around direct and vicarious experiences of policing.

BLACK WITNESSING, STATE VIOLENCE, AND RESISTANCE

Dark sousveillance describes the ways that black communities have historically used counter-surveillance strategies to challenge and resist racialized state surveillance and violence (Browne 2015). As a form of resistance, black communities repurpose surveillance techniques used by those in power to facilitate protection and challenge oppression (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020). From slave

narratives and newspapers to video and cellphone footage, black journalists and activists have used many counter-surveillance techniques to bring awareness to state violence (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020). Allissa V. Richardson (2020) theorizes one form of counter-surveillance as *black witnessing*, or investigations that give an account of state violence from the perspective of black people and communities. She explains black witnessing as "a special kind of gaze: one of defiance, self-defense and self-preservation" (Corbyn 2020). In its many forms, black witnessing is a method through which to observe black people's political agency around and resistance to state violence (Richardson 2020).

Beth Richie (2012:143) defines black women's activism and resistance as a "range of activities designed to change the social arrangements that privilege those in power at the expense of more marginalized groups." As such, black women's resistance has historically and simultaneously worked to address not only the interactional dynamics between black people and the experience of state violence, but also the broader structural conditions that cause these experiences (Camp 2004; Richie 2012; Ritchie 2017). Thus, while the state surveils black communities, black women's witnessing functions as a form of counter-surveillance resistance that is grounded in protection from and alleviation of state violence (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020; Wells 2014). Examples of black women's witnessing includes the chronicling of white mob lynchings (Wells 2014) and intentionally making their grief around state violence against their children and communities publicly visible (Al'Uqdah and Adomako 2017; Pool 2015).

Recent iterations of witnessing include civilian use of data and technology to capture video footage of police violence, contributing to the high-profile status of different cases (Bock 2016; Brown et al. 2017; Richardson 2020). This type of documentation mobilizes "the gaze," or witnessing, to "see" encounters, and works to reconfigure power relations between marginalized populations and police (Bock 2016:17). An additional example includes cop-watching by organizations and volunteer-based groups, who record police encounters to promote "democratic accountability of a state institution that has tremendous power in the lives of marginalized citizens" (Huey, Walby, and Doyle 2006:150).

This increase in citizen documentation of police encounters accompanies a wave of social media activism, which uses social network technology to organize and coordinate real-world action (Bock 2016; Brown et. al 2017; Thompson and Smith 2017). Movements with hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName often work in tandem with video footage to raise consciousness about the vulnerability of marginalized groups to police violence (Brown et al. 2017). As such, witnessing is used not only as a counter-surveillance tool to promote safety during police encounters, but also for activism working towards police accountability and the alleviation of other forms of state violence (Al'Uqdah and Adomako 2017; Bock 2016; Brown et al. 2017; Pool 2015; Richardson 2020). In this paper, we examine black women's use of witnessing to navigate police contact in their day-to-day lives.

Inequality and Navigating Police Violence

Populations targeted by police vary in their responses to criminalization and surveillance based on their race, gender, sexuality, and social class (Dow 2016; Greene, Urbanik, and Yankey 2021; Jones 2009; Powell and Phelps 2021; Rios 2011; Robinson 2020; Stuart and Benezra 2018). For example, Rios (2011) finds that black and Latino adolescents and young men respond to surveillance and criminalization by internalizing negative messages and reanimating stereotypes about race and masculinity. Stuart and Benezra (2018) demonstrate how black adolescent boys circumvent street harassment from officers by engaging in heteronormative romantic displays with women. Jones (2009) shows how black girls try to avoid calling the police for help, and instead use respectability politics and violence to protect themselves from harassment and violence. Robinson (2020) illustrates how LGBTQ youth resist the policing of their expansive gender expressions and sexuality through

deliberate non-conformance to heteronormativity. Further, research on how a racially diverse group of women navigate police raids illustrates that they can oscillate between emphasizing feminine normative roles of themselves as victims or good mothers (Greene et al. 2021). In each case, race, gender, sexuality, and class shapes strategies for navigating police criminalization, contact, and violence.

Understudied are black women's strategies for navigating their day-to-day risk of police contact, with their responses to policing often theorized on the periphery of others' involvement with officers. For example, as community leaders, black women assist victims in their neighborhoods after police violence and are advocates in local and national social justice movements promoting police accountability (Aniefuna, Aniefuna, and Williams 2020; Burrowes 2019; Khan-Cullors and Bandele 2017; Smith 2016, 2018). As mothers, black women engage in care labor to protect children from police, teaching them how to understand and mitigate their risk of police contact and violence (Dow 2016; Elliott and Reid 2019; Malone Gonzalez 2020; Turner 2020). As partners and friends, black women assist black men in "seeking cover" from officers (Stuart and Benezra 2018).

These works are important for understanding racialized, gendered, and classed processes related to policing, especially given that other people's experiences with police also have detrimental impacts on black women's health and well-being (Comfort 2016; Lee and Wildeman 2013; Lee et al. 2014; Sewell, Jefferson, and Lee 2016; Sewell et al. 2021; Smith 2018). However, studies centering black women's own responses to police are also important because their social position in multiple systems of inequality makes them vulnerable to carceral and police policies and practices that systemically target them for violence *while* delegitimizing them as victims (Collins 1998; Crenshaw 1991; Crenshaw et al. 2015; Lindsey 2022; Potter 2006; Ritchie 2017). This article analyzes black women's use of witnessing as a method for navigating police contact and their broader delegitimization as victims of violence.

Black Women and Legal Estrangement

Black women's experiences include both interactional violence in police encounters and institutional failures that delegitimize them throughout the carceral system. Importantly, beyond shaping how black women navigate the carceral system, institutional failures also influence how black women experience police violence. For example, in 2015 Shardayreon Hill testified against former officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who had sexually assaulted her and numerous other black women (Ritchie 2016; Sedensky and Murphy 2015). Targeting black women with criminal records and those living in low-income neighborhoods, Holtzclaw thought no one would believe the black women victims over himself, a police officer (Alter 2015; Lindsey 2022; Testa 2015). In this way, Holtzclaw exploited the institutional failures of police departments and carceral systems that have historically delegitimized black women as victims of violence (Ritchie 2016).

Legal estrangement, defined as "a marginal and ambivalent relationship with society, the law, and predominant social norms that emanates from institutional and legal failure" (Bell 2017:2083), provides a frame through which to analyze both interactions with officers and the institutional contexts in which hostile encounters occur. Bell (2017) identifies three levels at which this mistrust occurs, including interactions, vicarious marginalization, and structural exclusion. Black feminist criminologists identify links between estrangement and lived experiences by analyzing how these broader structural and institutional failures marginalize and shape the treatment of black women in the carceral system and policing. Specifically, within the frames of marginalization and legal estrangement, black women are not seen as credible sources of their own narratives and legitimate victims of violence (Collins 1998, 2004; Gross 2015; Long and Ullman 2013; Potter 2006; Slatton and Richard 2020).

Given that black women are victims of police deadly force, as well as systemically targeted for police sexual violence (Crenshaw et al. 2015; Edwards, Lee, and Esposito 2019; Hitchens et al. 2018; Lindsey 2022; Ritchie 2017), we examine how black women strategize around their exclusion from legal protection, their delegitimization as victims, and their risk of police violence. By analyzing

witnessing as a strategy for navigating police contact *and* institutional failures of the broader carceral system, we highlight how black women conceptualize it as both a shorter-term strategy for protection and a method to promote longer-term advocacy. We then conclude by theorizing black women's witnessing as a form of resistance against police contact and legal estrangement.

METHODS

This paper is based on findings from a project that uses interviews, field observations, and surveys to investigate police violence against black women. We do not analyze the field observations and surveys, but draw primarily from 32 in-depth, life history interviews conducted as a part of the larger study by the first author. The interviews with black women took place in an urban, predominantly white, southern city in the United States. To address participants' concerns about retaliation, especially for those who engage in police violence activism, we anonymized the location of the study. The study's main objective was to ascertain black women's experiences with police, their perceptions of policing, and responses to police violence. Black women were recruited through social clubs, nonprofits, and educational institutions; community events focused on black women and/or about policing; organizational and local residents' social media accounts; black women's personal and professional networks; and direct contact with black women in the first author's field site. Black women were asked to complete an online survey about police violence. At the end of the survey, the women indicated whether they were interested in participating in a voluntary interview.

Using multiple strategies to recruit participants allowed for increased demographic diversity on social class, ethnicity, sexuality, and neighborhood and/community affiliation. All participants identified as black women, including cisgender, transgender, or gender non-conforming black women. Participants came from diverse social class backgrounds with self-reported annual household incomes ranging from less than $10,000 to $149,000, and educational attainments ranging from high school diploma/GED equivalent to professional doctorates or PhDs. Table 1 includes detailed demographic information. All respondents were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Interviews were conducted primarily in-person by the first author with five black women opting for telephone interviews. The interviews lasted up to two hours and covered the women's life histories with police. Specifically, the participants answered questions about their views on police, childhood and adulthood experiences with police and conversations around policing, coping with police violence, police violence on social media, and police reform. In this manuscript, we draw from their responses from the third section of the interview around adult experiences with police, where participants answered questions about their strategies for navigating interactions with officers.

The first author recorded all interviews except one in which the participant did not feel comfortable being recorded. Additionally, a few participants asked that the interviewer turn off the recorder when discussing details about their experiences of violence. In cases where the recorder was turned off, the interviewer asked for permission to take notes, and the participants consented. The first author also took notes and made written and/or audio memos after all in-depth interviews.

Feminist methodology discusses the importance of centering women's standpoint, particularly with violence, and providing safe environments for them to discuss these experiences with researchers (Allen 2011; Collins 1998, 2000, 2004; Devault 1990; González-López 2010). This includes incorporating personal experiences and allowing time during the interview for participants to ask questions (Devault 1990; González-López 2010). For example, the interviewer allowed participants to ask them questions about the author's interactions with police. Author 1's positionality as a black middle-class woman influenced her access and rapport. Many black women were hesitant to participate in interviews about police violence, and some expressed that they were willing to participate only because the interviewer was also a black woman. One specific example included a participant who told the author that they had waited in their car and considered driving away until they realized the researcher was a black woman. In many cases, recommendations from community members or prior

Table 1. Respondent Demographic Information

Name[a]	*Age*	*Race*	*Education*	*Income*
Abena	32	Black/African	High School	$20,000-$29,000
Alexis	27	Black/African American	Bachelors	$30,000-$39,000
Ashley	31	Black/African American and African	High School	$30,000-$39,000
Audrey	35	Black/African and Afro-Caribbean	Masters	$30,000-$39,000
Candace	37	Black/African American	Masters	$40,000-$49,000
Dana	27	Black/African and African American	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Danielle	25	Black/African	Masters	$20,000-$29,000
Devin	37	Black/Biracial or Multiracial	Bachelors	$80,000-$89,000
Ella	26	Black/African American	Bachelors	$40,000-$49,000
Gina	30	Black/Latinx	Bachelors	$40,000-$49,000
Jade	38	Black	Bachelors	—
Joy	31	Black/African American	Masters	$40,000-$49,000
Karen	26	Black/African American	High School	$40,000-$49,000
Keisha	24	Black/African American	Bachelors	$40,000-$49,000
Kerry	27	Black/African American	Bachelors	$50,000-$59,000
Kristen	23	Black/African American	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Krystal	32	Black/African American and Biracial or Multiracial	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Laura	26	Black/African American	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Layla	28	Black/African American	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Lois	36	Black/African American	Masters	$50,000-$59,000
Michelle	35	Black/Biracial or Multiracial	Masters	$90,000-$99,000
Nema	18	Black/African	High School	$60,000-$69,000
Quita	27	Black/African American	Bachelors	$60,000-$69,000
Robin	35	Black/Biracial or Multiracial	Masters	$30,000-$39,000
Sadia	31	Black/African American	Professional Doctorate or PhD	Less than $10,000
Shelia	25	Black/African	Bachelors	$40,000-$49,000
Simone	33	Black/African American	Professional Doctorate or PhD	$60,000-$69,000
Tina	47	Black/African American	Bachelors	$140,000-$149,000
Teyana	33	Black/African American	Bachelors	$30,000-$39,000
Toya	23	Black/African American	Bachelors	$20,000-$29,000
Veronica	25	Black/Latinx	Technical or Trade Degree	Less than $10,000
Violet	41	Black/African American	Bachelors	$90,000-$99,000

participants, repeated contact in the field, and time allocation for participants' questions addressed issues related to access and rapport.

We used MAXQDA Software in the coding process, performing an inductive and grounded theory analysis of black women's strategies for navigating police contact and violence based on comparative and iterative processes (Charmaz 2006). This included initial coding of how black women discuss strategies for themselves and other black women to use during encounters. We analyzed their discussions of how they understand and respond to the risk of police contact through their advice for other black women, preparation for their own encounters, and reflections on their past experiences with police. Black women discussed numerous strategies for interacting with the police, including embodied

comportment, behavioral changes, avoidance, asserting one's knowledge about legal systems, explicit noncompliance, deferential performances, and witnessing. Each author made descriptive memos about each strategy, and recoded interviews based on these developed themes. Witnessing emerged as one of the most salient strategies shared by black women across social class. We then returned to the interviews to code for the different types of witnessing black women discussed, specifically physical witnessing, virtual witnessing, and institutional witnessing, and made additional memos about these three different types.

Last, we coded social class variations in each witnessing category based on black women's childhood and adult social class backgrounds. This included education and income (Krieger, Williams, and Moss 1997), occupation and/or occupational authority (Lareau 2002), references to their parents' education and/or occupation (Lareau 2002, 2003), descriptions of their childhood resources, behavior, and/or childhood appearance, and/or ability to adapt to different settings comparatively to their peers (Dow 2019). In this study, many black women have high educational attainment and low annual incomes, reflective of a broader trend of black women having higher educational attainment yet receiving lower pay relative to other populations with similar educational backgrounds (Miller and Vagins 2018; Thompson 2019).

Social class status is associated with institutional access (Dow 2019; Lacy 2007), reliance on institutions for support (Lareau 2015), and social capital in navigating institutions (Lacy 2007; Lareau 2015). This paper is not an analysis of social class differences in the use of witnessing among black women; however, we do note that black women across social class use both physical and virtual witnessing. We also observe that institutional witnessing is discussed only among black women with high educational attainments and those who grew up in what they would describe as middle-class families. One exception included a black woman who did not grow up in the middle-class but has a high educational attainment and who now works with institutions as an activist around policing. We focus on how black women mobilize different forms of witnessing to address their risk of police violence and legal estrangement.

FINDINGS

Black witnessing engages counter-surveillance techniques that center the perspectives of black people and communities with regard to state violence (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020). Black women have a long history of stepping into the role of witness for other people (Cooper 2020; Richardson 2020), and this study analyzes how they mobilize witnessing as a strategy for navigating interactions with officers. Specifically, we demonstrate how black women use witnessing to respond to both their risk of police violence and their legal estrangement, often seen through their delegitimization as victims of violence (Bell 2017; Gross 2015; Potter 2006; Richie 2012; Ritchie 2017).

In these findings, we examine the versatility of black women's witnessing through three forms: (1) physical witnessing, (2) virtual witnessing, and (3) institutional witnessing. We show that black women use witnessing as a short-term strategy to influence officer behavior and deescalate violence during interactions. Yet, witnessing also materializes as a long-term strategy for black women to gather evidence of police use of force and promote officer accountability when seeking justice after direct contact. Further, we illustrate how in addition to employing this strategy for themselves, black women attempt to occupy the role of short- and long-term witness for other black people encountering the police.

Physical Witnessing

black women see themselves as potential targets of police violence, especially when they are alone with officers. In response, they discuss *physical witnessing*, or mobilizing observers in the vicinity of police contact, as a way to influence officer behavior and dissuade the escalation of force during

police encounters. Physical witnessing is also conceptualized as a way for black women to avoid becoming invisible victims of violence.

For example, Laura, a 26-year-old black woman, shares her relief at having a physical witness present at a recent police encounter. She says a black woman family member saw her pulled over on the side of the road by an officer and called her to ask if she was okay. Laura responds, "Yeah, but I need you to turn back just in case." She describes being "happy" this black woman family member was "right there" and understood immediately that Laura needed a physical witness. Laura goes on to state:

> We got witnesses. I felt I was thankful that I had somebody just so happened to be driving by and was able to stop and be there. Thankful that I live around the corner from my grandma house. I got stopped around the corner from my grandma house and that my uncle was able to get there, so yeah.

Laura describes how relieved she was to be near her family, and that a black woman family member mobilized multiple physical witnesses, including her grandmother and uncle, to the encounter on her behalf. Notably, Laura also points to proximity and availability as important factors in leveraging physical witnesses as a form of immediate protection from police.

Danielle, a 25-year-old black woman, also discusses the importance of physical witnessing. Specifically, she reflects upon Sandra Bland, whose death exemplifies for Danielle black women's increased risk of police violence when they are alone:

> I just think it gets sticky when there's no other public eyes . . . like with Sandra, everything happened in the truck, I believe, or the car, the transport vehicle when it was just the cops and her. There's no way she could've gotten her way out of that situation. At all cost, make sure there are people around. Hopefully, that would deescalate the situation, hopefully, not always, but hopefully.

Danielle explains how Sandra Bland's police encounter influences her own perception of the relationship between being alone and black women's risk of police violence. She identifies how interactions with officers can "get sticky when there's no other public eyes," or when there is no countersurveillance or no physical observers to witness an encounter. She views the lack of observers as exacerbating the power dynamics between black women and police, increasing the risk for violence. To address these risks, Danielle states that "at all cost" black women should "make sure there are people around." *Physical witnesses*, then, provide immediate protection by disrupting unequal power dynamics between police and black women and influencing officer behavior to "deescalate the situation."

The notion that physical observers can influence the outcome of an encounter is tempered, however, as Danielle also acknowledges broader power relations that shape interactions between black women and police. Her awareness of the strained relationship between black women and police is revealed through her statement that there is "no way" Sandra Bland could have "gotten her way out of that situation." Danielle's acknowledgement of the limitations of physical witnessing as a protective strategy during police encounters is informed by her broader legal estrangement, a sense that even with witnesses, officers may still use violence and escape accountability if black women are harmed. Nevertheless, physical witnessing is preferred over having "no other public eyes" and is seen as a protective strategy to increase black women's safety when interacting with police.

While physical witnessing is primarily linked to immediate protection during police stops, black women also utilize this strategy proactively when engaging police or calling officers for assistance. Recognizing their legal estrangement, or marginal position vis-à-vis carceral institutions, black women strategize in advance to have witnesses present that they believe will shore up their own credibility, witnesses who are seen as credible and legitimate by police. For example, Lois, a 36-year-old black

woman, expresses concerns about being alone with officers when seeking help. To temper her fear of becoming both a victim of violence and one that is disbelieved, Lois describes leveraging a white man, with whom she was in a relationship, as a physical witness:

> Like, I think I'm a little bit more worried about having to call the police. If I need to call the police officer to my house, when I still was on talking terms with my ex, who was white, I was going to call him before anybody else. I need there to be a white man here to just handle this and make sure that I don't get shot.

Lois explains how her ex is an ideal physical witness that she would call "before anybody else" because he is "a white man." She illustrates how black women recognize the implications of their legal estrangement, or structural vulnerability based on race and gender, throughout carceral institutions. Lois's understanding of her own position as a black woman, as well as her ex's position as a white man, informs how she chooses and mobilizes a physical witness. This is in line with recent research that shows how white people within the criminal legal system are generally better positioned to negotiate encounters and are more often given the benefit of the doubt by legal actors (Clair 2020). Understanding this, Lois attempts to reconfigure the power dynamics between herself and police officers through using a white man as a physical witness. For Lois, a white man would be able to "handle this," or observe her interaction with police, so that she does not become a victim of lethal force. Accordingly, Lois shows how black women preemptively mobilize witnesses to address the power relations between themselves and police.

When Ella, a 26-year-old black woman, describes whom she would leverage as physical witnesses, she also reveals a carefully thought-out assessment of the relationship between her surroundings and who makes a suitable witness.

> Lately, it's been to call my grandmother or my mom, cause—or my grandmother, cause my grandmother can come immediately. She's down the street. I work in the area. I live in the area, so somebody can come if anything were to happen.

Ella's life centers around one neighborhood, and an ideal physical witness is someone who is nearby and can be readily available or who can "come immediately." For Ella, her grandmother fits these criteria as she prepares for potential interactions with officers. In this way, Ella mobilizes physical witnesses to address her immediate risk of harm.

When asked about strategies they use to navigate police contact for themselves, black women often discussed their strategies for protecting other black people in their communities. For example, Ella details how she uses witnessing for her own protection, but also how she strategizes to step into the role of witness for others in her community. She explains that police patrol her neighborhood where "a lot of black people . . . congregate in certain areas":

> Every now and then, I'll see like three officers with one black person. I'll pull over, and I'll just monitor for a little bit, for as long as I can, just to make sure everything's good. . . . If something were to happen, I could be that person that saw or reported it or documented the truth.

Ella describes physical witnessing for other black people as a strategy to mitigate carceral violence and potentially hold police officers accountable. In the role of witness, Ella sees herself as being able to "make sure everything's good" as well as gather evidence to "document the truth." Further, Ella explains she would "report" the incident, and she envisions herself playing an important part in this person's justice-seeking process. As such, black women understand physical witnessing as a way to protect themselves, as well as counter-surveillance labor enacted on behalf of other black people. Importantly, Ella shows how legal estrangement informs her witnessing, as she is skeptical that her

ability to physically observe an interaction will deescalate the encounter. Like Danielle, Ella acknowledges the limited capacity of physical witnessing to fully alleviate the potential for violence or address the power dynamics of policing. Even when she pulls over to "monitor for a little bit," Ella knows there is a possibility that her presence as a physical observer may not be enough to prevent violence. Still, this same ambivalence motivates her desire to be the "person that saw or reported it or documented the truth."

Whether police contact is officer-initiated or a response to a request for help, black women fear encounters with officers most acutely when they are alone. Black women describe physical witnessing as a way to address their risk of police violence and legal estrangement. Good physical witnesses are described as those who are in close proximity, who have flexible availability, and whose race and gender allow them to safely negotiate power imbalances with officers. Physical witnessing, as a protective strategy informed by legal estrangement, allows black women to counteract their delegitimization and marginalization as victims. When deployed for themselves, the immediate focus of physical witnessing is on safety and de-escalation. When black women step into the role of observers for others, physical witnessing emerges as a longer-term strategy for gathering evidence and ensuring officer accountability. In the next section, we explore how witnessing exists on a continuum, as black women shift from physical witnessing to virtual witnessing, mobilizing simultaneously to protect themselves and others, resist police violence, and address accountability.

Virtual Witnessing

black women are aware that they may not always have access to physical witnesses. This causes immense anxiety, and, in response, black women adapt by shifting to *virtual witnessing*, using cellular or social media technology to connect with others or record encounters with officers. Like physical witnessing, virtual witnessing is a protective strategy for immediately de-escalating use of force in police encounters. Beyond this, virtual witnessing involves longer-term advocacy, as black women consistently see it as a way to preserve evidence for holding officers accountable for police violence.

For example, Ella shares how, in the absence of physical witnesses, she uses virtual witnessing to gather evidence and mobilize physical observers. She states, "If I'm driving, and—any time a police officer is behind me, I get my phone ready to call somebody—either to call somebody or to record." Ella responds to the potential risk of police stops by preparing to call observers or record her encounter. This move from physical witnessing to virtual witnessing is also raised by Laura, who previously shared an experience of having physical witnesses present during police encounters. Laura describes using social media to generate virtual witnesses and counteract power imbalances between herself and officers, pointing to how police have their body camera and she has her "own cam."

Laura also talks about her anxiety around being constantly prepared to access virtual witnesses. Specifically, Laura is concerned about always having her phone's battery charged and her ability to log in quickly to Facebook Live:

> It's on my phone, but I'm not logged into where I can automatically go live and stuff. . . . I always think about it, especially a lot of times when my phone is about to die. I was like that's one thing that comes to my mind. I'm like, "dang, if something happened with the police and me, I can't even" – my phones are dying in the middle of me recording on Facebook Live. It's crazy to have to think about that.

Laura repeatedly expresses stress at remaining constantly prepared to interact with police, especially when she is by herself. She says she is "always thinking about" the potential of being alone with officers and unable to access virtual witnesses. Her anxiety increases as she ruminates on the technical difficulties that can accompany virtual witnessing. Laura's anxiety is further exacerbated by her legal estrangement, as she does not trust the officer's camera and wants her "own cam" or footage of the

encounter. Knowing that she cannot always access physical witnesses, Laura mobilizes social media and technology to record encounters "if something happened with police."

Karen, a 26-year-old black woman, also talks about virtual witnessing and utilizing Facebook Live in police encounters:

> I think automatically, I just wanna go on Facebook Live, just in case. I think that's my number one thing, is making sure someone can see, just in case something happens 'cause you just never know. I just would never wanna end up like that poor girl, Sandra.

As with Danielle, the memory of Sandra Bland's police encounter informs Karen's fear of police violence, particularly the increased risk of being alone with police as a black woman. In response, Karen uses virtual witnessing, or "making sure someone can see." Ensuring visibility is persistently described as black women's main concern when interacting with officers, or in Karen's case, her "number one thing." Thus, in preparation for police contact, she plans to "go on Facebook Live" and mobilize virtual witnesses "just in case."

Karen goes on to list the various platforms she would use and stresses the importance of virtual witnesses. This illustrates how virtual witnessing, beyond providing protection during an interaction, works as a longer-term strategy to increase the chance of accountability in the carceral system:

> I would go on Facebook Live or on Instagram Live, something. FaceTime someone until the thing is over. Video myself. Something, just so they're gonna be held accountable for their actions. Well, try.

First, Karen would go to different online platforms, or use virtual witnessing, to de-escalate violence, staying online "until the thing is over." Next, Karen envisions virtual witnessing as the ability to preserve a record of the interaction and hold officers "accountable for their actions." Virtual witnessing is therefore a strategy that shores up protection and combats legal estrangement, working to increase Karen's safety *and* preserve footage for future advocacy. While Karen uses virtual witnessing to promote officer accountability, she is skeptical of its ability to successfully ensure accountability in a carceral system where she experiences legal estrangement, and she speaks to this tension ("Well, try"). Recording encounters, while seen as generating evidence, is thus understood as limited in the context of institutional failures to hold police officers accountable for violence. Still, Karen and other black women persist in using virtual witnessing as a means to pursue accountability.

Kristen, a 23-year-old black woman, also speaks to the importance of virtual witnessing within the context of legal estrangement. She states, "I know in all situations to record the police as an attempt to have, as a proactive attempt to have some sort of evidence in the event that you are killed or your rights are violated." Kristen says that "in all situations" it is important to use virtual witnessing to produce evidence of an encounter. She views gathering her own evidence as important for addressing the power relations between herself and officers, for seeking justice for herself if her "rights are violated," or for others seeking justice on her behalf if she "[is] killed."

Like other black women in this study, Kristen transitions from discussing personal safety strategies to stepping into the role of witness for others. She says she "moves in different circles" with her "college friends" or in "large groups of people." In these instances of being with other people, Kristen attempts to "stay away and just record," leveraging herself as both a virtual and physical witness. As Kristen uses her own eyes and her phone's camera to counter-surveil officers when she is in larger groups with other people, she shows how black women can seamlessly shift between different forms of witnessing to protect themselves while holding in tandem the desire to protect others.

Virtual witnessing is a strategic response utilized by black women most often when they are alone with officers and do not have access to physical witnesses. This form of witnessing is discussed for its potential to deescalate violence, but mostly, for generating evidence. Specifically, black women

discuss how virtual witnessing helps preserve a record of police interactions, which they plan to use in the future to hold officers accountable. As such, black women use their phones and social media platforms to counteract institutional power dynamics and prepare for justice-seeking processes within the carceral system. Virtual witnessing is conceptualized as a form of protection and resistance for themselves and others. In the next section, we analyze how some black women with middle-class backgrounds attempt to directly engage police and carceral institutions themselves, along with others in their networks with institutional power, as institutional witnesses.

Institutional Witnessing

Institutional witnessing refers to the leveraging of police or other institutional contacts as interveners to interactions with officers. It mobilizes black women's ambivalent relationship and access to carceral institutions and networks to address the power imbalances between themselves and others with police. The women who discuss this form of witnessing have middle-class childhood backgrounds, along with high educational attainment. Others, without these middle-class childhood backgrounds, have achieved social class mobility through educational attainment and work within these institutions as activists around policing. Like physical and virtual witnessing, *institutional witnessing* aims to deescalate violence and ensure officer accountability. Further, institutional witnessing attempts to mobilize actors within carceral institutions who have institutional power and knowledge for black women's and others' protection and advocacy. Institutional witnessing differs from physical and virtual witnessing in that the key resource is not immediate physical proximity or virtual access to other observers, but black women's ambivalent relationship with carceral institutions. Accordingly, institutional witnessing aims to address legal estrangement from the inside out, forcing the institution (and those within it) to hold itself accountable.

Similar to physical and virtual witnessing, black women adapt to using institutional witnessing based on their surroundings. In the previous section, Kristen highlights the importance of virtual witnessing as she describes recording all interactions with police. However, Kristen also describes using police officers *themselves* as witnesses in interactions, stating:

> I don't know who is going to rescue me. . . . So, if I'm by myself, I know to call the police. I'm going to call the police on the police. So, if I'm ever stopped I'm going to call 911. I know to go in a well-lit area. Like if I'm on a back road or something to try to get to the nearest civilization.

Kristen's numerous strategies all center around increasing her visibility, including going to "a well-lit area" and getting to "the nearest civilization." She also shares that she would call 911 in desperation if she were pulled over while alone, essentially "call[ing] the police on the police." Kristen indicates this is something she has learned, saying "I know to call the police." As such, she attempts to mobilize other officers as institutional observers to her interactions with police. These additional officers are used as institutional witnesses to address her safety and legal estrangement, working to counteract the power imbalances between Kristen and police officers initially involved in her encounter.

Lois, who discussed using her white male ex-romantic partner as a physical witness, also talks about mobilizing institutional witnesses. Like other black women in this study, Lois considers her own safety alongside her ability to ensure the safety of those in her community. Based on her social network access to individuals within police departments and other carceral institutions, Lois discusses herself as an institutional witness:

> If I see them out and about, like, sometimes, it's really, really varies. Sometimes, I will think about going over to them and be like, "Hey. What's going on?" Right? Because, like, there's a situational power there where, like, I know your boss's boss's boss.

As someone who works on issues of police violence with a local police department, Lois describes her unique "situational power" in knowing the police chief or the officers' "boss's boss's boss." Though cognizant of her marginal position within the institution, she mobilizes her connections to high-ranking police officers within departments, effectively drawing on her relationship to these officers as a resource. For Lois, this access to powerful individuals within police departments makes her an ideal institutional witness, as she aims to increase others' safety and officer accountability. Further, she points to how institutional witnessing involves black women mobilizing their access to others in positions of power. Lois goes on to describe how she would further enact her role as an institutional witness.

> I'm gonna ask you [the officer] some questions as though you might be helpful in helping me hold some other people accountable. What is your experience here because I really need to know what it is that they are doing on a regular basis and what they're seeing on a regular basis to be able to do my job well and make better recommendations.

In addition to a mechanism of safety, Lois views institutional witnessing as a data collection and accountability process, where she asks officers "some questions" to hold them responsible for their actions. She directly ties her role as an institutional witness to being a community activist and increasing her ability to "make better recommendations." In this way, she illustrates how witnessing is used to address inequality in interactions and institutions and resist abuses of power.

Dana, a 27-year-old black woman who is a lawyer, also discusses institutional witnessing of police encounters in the context of protests. Specifically, Dana explains the role that legal observers play in reducing and documenting police violence in mass gatherings.

> [If] you're in [a] protest, the idea is to have legal observers whose job is essentially to watch the police during these protests. That's something I've always tried to do, but I'm also, like, afraid.

Dana describes legal observers as institutionalized witnesses within marginalized communities who work to hold officers accountable during protests and support broader contexts of collective resistance. Thus, legal observers mobilize carceral processes to offset power imbalances between protestors and police. Dana explains institutional witnessing as something she has "tried to do" given her legal knowledge and access to carceral institutions, even though she is "afraid." Accordingly, she shows how witnessing can be both an individual strategy and collective response black women enact for their communities, despite their fears.

Institutional witnessing mobilizes black women's ambivalent relationship to carceral institutions and networks. This form of counter-surveillance aims to offset power imbalances with officers in individual encounters, protests, and the broader institutional contexts from which officers draw their power. Challenging power dynamics and promoting accountability at both the interactional and institutional level, institutional witnessing aims to counter legal estrangement from the inside out through the leveraging of carceral resources, access, and networks.

DISCUSSION

Black feminist criminology advocates for focusing on the lived experiences of black women's victimization, as well as exploring the relationship between their individual and collective resistance (Potter 2006). Further, it allows for an analysis between black women's structural oppression and the "impact of historical experiences of African Americans in the United States" (Potter 2006:115). In our analysis, we use a black feminist criminological framework to consider not only how black women respond to the risk of police contact, but also how this contact is conditioned by their awareness of marginalization and their larger legal estrangement within the carceral system.

Serving as a critical aspect of black resistance, black counter-surveillance, and, more specifically, *witnessing*, has historically been used to document white supremacist state violence and disseminate information regarding these experiences (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020). Building on work that theorizes black counter-surveillance and witnessing, black women illustrate how witnessing is used in everyday life to challenge and reconfigure relationships between marginalized groups and institutions (Browne 2015; Richardson 2020; Scott 1985). We show how black women in this study use and adapt witnessing to protect themselves and others from police violence and *legal estrangement*, the ways black women are marginalized in broader society and within the legal system (Bell 2017).

Physical witnessing is primarily used to address the immediate risk of police violence and deter the escalation of force during police encounters. Black women discuss ideal physical witnesses as those who are in close proximity and readily available to observe their interactions with officers. Highly attuned to the way race and gender conjointly shape the experience within police encounters, some black women also use their white social ties to buffer their interactions with police. Still, when black women step into the role of physical witness for others, they attempt to hold officers accountable, even as they doubt their ability to do so given their marginalized position vis-à-vis carceral institutions. Recognizing the broader context of their legal estrangement, knowing they may not be seen as credible witnesses, black women's use of physical witnessing is mostly focused on immediate safety rather than accountability.

Virtual witnessing is typically discussed as a strategy to mobilize physical witnesses, gather evidence, and hold officers accountable for their actions in the long-term. In virtual witnessing, black women use cell phones and social media platforms to respond quickly to encounters and preserve a record of the interaction for future advocacy. This study consists of a relatively younger cohort of black women, and so future work might explore the saliency of virtual witnessing, among other strategies, in an older cohort of black women.

Finally, *institutional witnessing* leverages black women's limited comfort with and access to carceral institutions and networks. It is mostly discussed by black women with middle-class backgrounds and/or institutional ties to the criminal legal system. This form of witnessing operates from the inside out, attempting to leverage individuals with institutional power to prevent violence and support institutional change. Across these three forms of witnessing, black women consistently discuss not only protecting themselves, but stepping into the role of witness for others.

We argue that witnessing, in its various forms, aims to address both the risk of police violence and black women's legal estrangement within the carceral system. In this study, we find that black women's ambivalence and distrust in the criminal legal system stemmed from their own interpersonal interactions, the vicarious experiences of others (particularly the collective memory of Sandra Bland), and their structural exclusion from legal protection. These women's sense of legal estrangement, operating at both an interactional and structural level, informed their use of witnessing as a protective strategy with the dual objective of short-term safety and longer-term accountability.

Prior research illustrates how differently targeted populations' responses to police reveal the relationship between social structures and interactions, and thus the ways in which policing reproduces inequality (Bell 2016; Dow 2019; Jones 2009; Rios 2011; Robinson 2020; Stuart and Benezra 2018). While we were not able to directly observe black women using witnessing as a part of this study, interviews allowed us to analyze the intent and adaptations of black women's witnessing strategies, as well as how race, gender, and class inform their decision-making process. We observe how black women's responses to policing recognizes the power relations within interactions with officers and the larger institutional, systemic, and structural contexts through which they draw their power. Black women work not only to reduce their risk of violence within interactions with police, but to reshape the broader institutions and contexts that enable police use of force.

While previous research on police violence and legal estrangement has focused on the experiences of working-class black women (Bell 2016; Desmond and Valdez 2012; Hitchens et al. 2018), we find that through witnessing, black women across the social class spectrum recognize and respond to both

the interactional risk of violence and their broader legal estrangement from carceral institutions and legal systems. Moreover, we argue that witnessing is a form of labor that black women enact for themselves and others. Previous research indicates that black women perform copious amounts of protective labor around the police, preparing children for police contact (Dow 2016; Elliott and Reid 2019; Malone Gonzalez 2019), serving as cover for others in the presence of police (Stuart and Benezra 2018), and advocating for others after police contact (Burrowes 2019; Smith 2016, 2018). In this study, we find that black women also take up the labor of witnessing as a way to protect themselves and others, deescalate violence, gather evidence, and promote accountability. Therefore, we theorize black women's witnessing as a form of racialized and gendered labor, and also propose that, in its varied forms, witnessing constructs police contact in black women's lives as an elongated process, beginning the moment they notice an officer and ending with the justice-seeking process. Witnessing, then, illuminates how police encounters are temporally expansive experiences and processes for black women.

This reconceptualization may also further our understanding of the health risks associated with police contact in the lives of black women. For instance, among black women, just knowing someone with criminal legal contact is a risk factor for poor health (Cooper et al. 2004; Sewell and Jefferson 2016; Sewell et al. 2016; Smith 2018). Girls and women express significant worry about vicarious reports of police misconduct (Hurst, McDermott, and Thomas 2005), and black women report dual frustration and fear around their own past and potential experiences of police neglect and misbehavior (Aniefuna et al. 2020; Cooper et al. 2004; Powell and Phelps 2021). Hypervigilance around police contact exacerbates stress, keeping the body in overdrive and shaping long-term health risk for black women (Sewell and Jefferson 2016). Further, following fatal encounters, black women's advocacy and grief can result in a "slow death" in which the trauma of police violence gradually leads to their own deaths (Smith 2016). Consequently, we argue that black women's witnessing illuminates a mechanism through which to understand the impact of police contact on black women's health.

Expanding the conceptualization of the police encounter to include black women's preparation, interaction, *and* advocacy work reveals an elongated process, characterized by continuous labor, that may prove consequential for black women's safety and health. Future research might investigate this expanded notion of police contact in relation to health. Scholars should also consider using a black feminist criminological lens to understand the relationship between intersecting systems and policing. This framework can be especially useful for analyzing how black women and other marginal groups experience legal estrangement and other forms of oppression within the carceral system.

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