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Criminalization of Poverty: Police Surveillance in Impoverished Urban Areas

Criminalización de la pobreza: vigilancia policial en zonas urbanas empobrecidas

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ABSTRACT
This ethnographic study examines the pervasive police surveillance and profiling practices targeting impoverished urban neighborhoods, focusing on informal settlements. Moving beyond statistical crime analysis, the research highlights how law enforcement systematically criminalizes poverty by subjecting marginalized residents to excessive monitoring, harassment, and control. Through in-depth fieldwork and interviews with community members and police officers in Latin American cities, the study uncovers the social and spatial mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion and reinforce structural inequalities. The novelty of this research lies in its detailed ethnographic insight into the lived experiences of surveillance and its role in maintaining socio-spatial segregation. By exposing the everyday dynamics of criminalization, this article contributes to critical urban studies and

debates on social justice, policing, and human rights in marginalized urban contexts.

Keywords *Criminalization of poverty*, *Police surveillance*, *Informal settlements*, *Ethnography*, *Urban inequality*

RESUMEN
Este estudio etnográfico examina las prácticas generalizadas de vigilancia y perfilamiento policial en barrios urbanos empobrecidos, con énfasis en asentamientos informales. Más allá del análisis estadístico del delito, la investigación destaca cómo las fuerzas del orden criminalizan sistemáticamente la pobreza al someter a las comunidades marginadas a un monitoreo excesivo, acoso y control. A través de trabajo de campo profundo y entrevistas con residentes y policías en ciudades latinoamericanas, el estudio revela los mecanismos sociales y espaciales que perpetúan la exclusión y refuerzan las desigualdades estructurales. La originalidad de esta investigación radica en su detallado enfoque etnográfico sobre las experiencias vividas de vigilancia y su papel en el mantenimiento de la segregación socioespacial. Al exponer las dinámicas cotidianas de criminalización, el artículo contribuye a los estudios urbanos críticos y a los debates sobre justicia social, policial y derechos humanos en contextos urbanos marginalizados.

Palabras clave *Criminalización de la pobreza*, *Vigilancia policial*, *Asentamientos informales*, *Etnografía*, *Desigualdad urbana*

A. Introduction

The contemporary urban landscape is increasingly defined by a widening chasm of economic inequality, where the management of marginalized populations has shifted from social welfare support to punitive governance. As neoliberal urbanism prioritizes the security of capital and affluent enclaves, the "problem" of urban poverty is frequently addressed through the expansion of the carceral state into the daily lives of the poor. This shift reflects what scholars describe as the "punitive turn," where the state utilizes law enforcement to manage the fallout of systemic economic exclusion (Wacquant, 2009). However, a significant gap exists in understanding how these macro-level policies translate into micro-level interactions in the Global South. In many global metropolises, policing has become the primary mechanism of urban control, serving as a tool to contain and regulate populations that have been rendered "surplus" by shifts in the global economy. This

transformation is not merely about maintaining order but about the active construction of a governance model that views the poor not as citizens in need of support, but as potential threats to the established social and spatial hierarchy (Beckett & Western, 2001). Consequently, the urban geography is increasingly bifurcated into zones of hyper-investment and zones of hyper-surveillance, where the latter are subjected to disciplinary practices designed to enforce socio-spatial boundaries.

Informal settlements and marginalized neighborhoods function as the primary theaters for these intensive surveillance operations, acting as laboratories for new forms of spatial control. Within these territories, the presence of the state is felt primarily through the prism of the police uniform and the ubiquity of monitoring technologies. Unlike affluent areas where policing is often invisible and reactive, policing in marginalized urban spaces is proactive, constant, and deeply embedded in the physical environment. According to Fassin (2013), the police do not merely enforce the law in these spaces; they produce a specific form of social order that reinforces the marginality of the inhabitants. Despite this, there is a notable gap in the literature regarding the technological agency of infrastructure—specifically how physical neglect (broken lights, narrow alleys) is weaponized as a surveillance justification. The spatial logic of these areas—characterized by high density and limited access to formal legal protections—allows for a level of intrusive monitoring that would be politically untenable in wealthier districts. This hyper-surveillance creates a "panoptic" urban environment where residents are perpetually aware of the state's gaze, leading to a profound sense of psychological enclosure that limits their freedom of movement and access to the wider city.

Traditional analyses of law enforcement often rely on crime rates as the primary metric for evaluating police efficacy; however, such perspectives are fundamentally limited in their ability to capture the nuances of urban control. A more critical assessment reveals that modern policing has shifted away from a reactive model toward a preventive, proactive, and surveillance-oriented framework (Harcourt, 2007). This evolution is particularly evident in the way police forces manage urban "disorder," where low-level infractions and behavioral "incivilities" are prioritized over serious criminal activity. By focusing on the "broken windows" of a community, policing practices often criminalize the very survival strategies employed by those living in poverty, such as street vending or sleeping in public spaces (Smith, 1996). A conceptual gap remains in how "disorder" is legally defined in a way that excludes the economic necessity of the informal economy. This paradigm shift suggests that the objective is no longer the

reduction of crime, but rather the management of visible poverty to maintain the aesthetic and economic value of the urban core. In this context, policing functions as a method of social hygiene, scrubbing the city of its "undesirable" elements to facilitate gentrification.

The criminalization of poverty is fundamentally rooted in the framing of marginalized neighborhoods as inherently dangerous and chaotic zones that require constant intervention. This narrative is frequently bolstered by media representations and political rhetoric that conflate economic deprivation with moral failing. As a result, law enforcement agencies often operate under a "warrior" ethos, viewing the communities they serve as hostile territory rather than as constituents (Balko, 2013). This framing justifies the normalization of racialized and class-based profiling, where individuals are targeted for their perceived belonging to a "suspect" class. Statistics often reflect this bias; for instance, minority populations are stopped and searched at rates significantly higher than their white counterparts, even when accounting for crime variables (Alexander, 2010). However, there is an empirical gap in documenting the emotional and psychological toll that this constant profiling takes on the collective identity of a neighborhood. These practices are not aberrations but are systemic features of a policing model that relies on the identification and containment of marginalized groups to uphold a specific vision of social stability and middle-class comfort.

Despite the prevalence of these dynamics, the everyday practices of policing—the mundane, repetitive interactions between officers and residents—remain relatively underexamined within the broader field of urban studies. Most research tends to focus on high-profile incidents of police violence, often overlooking the "slow violence" of daily harassment. This study seeks to address this significant research gap by investigating how poverty is criminalized through the minutiae of law enforcement routines. By examining the "micro-physics of power" in marginalized urban areas, we can better understand how sovereignty is performed on the street level (Butler, 2004). The research explores specific forms of surveillance, such as constant ID checks and the mapping of social networks, that shape the life trajectories of residents. Understanding these mechanisms is crucial for uncovering how state power is leveraged to maintain class hierarchies and how these interactions foster a deep-seated distrust between the community and the state. This focus on "everydayness" allows for a departure from sensationalist accounts toward a more grounded understanding of how systemic oppression is maintained through administrative and physical persistence.

Central to this inquiry is the question of how residents and police officers respectively perceive and justify these practices of socio-spatial control. For many residents of informal settlements, the police represent an unpredictable force that enforces a "legal cynicism" where the law is seen as a tool of oppression rather than protection (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Conversely, police officers often justify their tactics through the language of "preventive security," viewing their presence as a necessary bulwark against chaos. This divergence in perception highlights a gap in existing literature regarding the "occupational common sense" of officers working in slums—how they rationalize the suspension of civil liberties as a professional necessity. While the state views intensive policing as a means of ensuring "safety," the targets experience it as a form of "carceral citizenship" (Miller & Stuart, 2017). By capturing these competing narratives, this study aims to illustrate the complex social psychology that underpins the criminalization of poverty and the way it becomes embedded in the cultural fabric of the city, creating a feedback loop of mutual suspicion and escalating control.

This research provides a significant empirical contribution through the use of immersive ethnography, allowing for a granular look at the lived realities of policing. Unlike quantitative studies that often strip away the human context of law enforcement data, an ethnographic approach captures the nuances of fear, resistance, and negotiation. This study addresses the methodological gap in urban studies where the voices of the "policed" are often secondary to the data provided by the "policers." Through extended fieldwork, this study documents the subtle ways in which residents navigate a landscape of surveillance, from altering their walking routes to developing community-based warning systems. This "ground-up" perspective is essential for identifying the disconnect between official policing protocols and the actual practices on the street. It allows us to see how the "social life" of the police is intertwined with the social life of the neighborhood, often in ways that are detrimental to the democratic health of the community (Goffman, 2014). This approach ensures that the marginalized are not merely subjects of a study, but active narrators of their own socio-spatial experiences.

Theoretically, this study contributes to critical policing and urban studies by synthesizing concepts of spatial control with theories of neoliberal governance. It challenges the conventional view of the police as a neutral arbiter of law, instead positioning them as active agents in the production of urban space and social inequality. By drawing on the work of scholars such as Loïc Wacquant and David Harvey, this research connects the micro-level interactions of the street to the

macro-level shifts in global capital and state policy. It argues that the policing of poverty is a spatialized manifestation of a broader political-economic project aimed at managing the contradictions of capitalism (Harvey, 2005). There is a theoretical gap in connecting urban "revanchism" with the rise of digital surveillance in impoverished zones, which this study intends to bridge. This theoretical integration provides a robust framework for understanding why certain bodies are deemed "out of place" in the modern city and how law enforcement is mobilized to "re-place" them through incarceration, displacement, or constant monitoring, effectively turning the city into a site of exclusion.

This work offers a normative contribution to ongoing debates regarding social justice and human rights in the 21st-century city. By exposing the mechanisms through which poverty is criminalized, the study advocates for a fundamental shift away from punitive urbanism toward a model of governance that prioritizes human dignity. It questions the ethics of using surveillance as a substitute for investment in education, housing, and healthcare. There is a critical policy gap in current urban planning that fails to account for how security designs inadvertently facilitate the criminalization of the poor. As urban populations grow and the gap between rich and poor widens, the current model of policing marginalized spaces is becoming increasingly unsustainable and dehumanizing (Vitale, 2017). This research serves as a call to action for policymakers to reimagine the city not as a site of containment, but as a space of genuine inclusion where the right to the city is extended to all inhabitants, regardless of their economic status. Only by dismantling the structures of socio-spatial control can a truly equitable urban future be realized.

B. Literature Review

1. *The Criminalization of Poverty*

The historical roots of poverty control are deeply embedded in the evolution of the modern state, where the management of "vagancy" and "idleness" has long served to discipline the labor force. From the English Poor Laws to the colonial administration of indigenous populations, the state has consistently utilized legal frameworks to categorize the poor into "deserving" and "undeserving" subjects. In the contemporary era, this legacy has mutated into what scholars identify as the "criminalization of poverty," a process where the survival strategies of the economically marginalized are reframed as criminal offenses (Wacquant, 2001). This historical trajectory reveals that the penal system has always functioned as a secondary labor market regulator, ensuring that those outside formal employment remain under state supervision. However, while historical models often relied

on physical confinement, modern iterations are characterized by a more fluid integration of legal and social control mechanisms. The shift from rehabilitative ideals to purely punitive measures reflects a broader transformation in the state's role, moving from a provider of social safety nets to a manager of social risks.

The transition toward neoliberal governance since the late 20th century has significantly accelerated punitive social policies. Under the neoliberal paradigm, the withdrawal of the state from social welfare provision is compensated by the expansion of the penal apparatus—a phenomenon described by Loïc Wacquant (2009) as the "centaur state," which is liberal at the top toward corporations and paternalistic/punitive at the bottom toward the precarious. This governance model prioritizes "workfare" over welfare, mandating participation in precarious labor markets while simultaneously increasing the penalties for non-compliance. This policy shift is not merely administrative; it represents a fundamental reconfiguration of the social contract where the "problem" of poverty is no longer viewed through the lens of structural inequality but as a matter of individual behavioral failure. Consequently, the state's primary engagement with marginalized populations is increasingly mediated through the criminal justice system, leading to the mass incarceration and hyper-supervision of the poor, which serves to neutralize the social fallout of rising economic precarity and market volatility.

This evolution from welfare to surveillance and punishment marks a departure from the "social state" toward the "penal state." In this current regime, surveillance functions as a continuous, low-intensity form of punishment that precedes any formal criminal charge. For the urban poor, the transition means that social services—once points of support—now often serve as nodes of monitoring and data collection. For instance, the receipt of public housing or unemployment benefits is frequently contingent upon submitting to intrusive inspections and behavioral monitoring. This "carceral continuum" ensures that even outside of prison walls, the lives of the marginalized are governed by the logic of the cell (Foucault, 1977; Davis, 2003). The convergence of social policy and policing creates a reality where the "management of the poor" is synonymous with their constant observation. This systemic shift has profound implications for urban life, as it transforms neighborhoods into open-air carceral spaces where every movement is logged and every social interaction is potentially subject to state intervention and subsequent penalization.

2. *Urban Policing and Surveillance*

Modern urban policing relies on a repertoire of high-intensity tactics, including stop-and-search, patrol saturation, and the burgeoning field of predictive policing. These methods are rarely distributed evenly across the urban fabric; instead, they are concentrated in "hot spots" that almost invariably coincide with low-income and minority neighborhoods. Predictive policing, which uses algorithms to forecast where crimes are likely to occur, often suffers from "feedback loops" where biased historical arrest data leads to even more intensive policing in already over-policed areas (Lum & Isaac, 2016). Stop-and-search practices, while often justified as a means of confiscating weapons, serve a broader symbolic purpose: they communicate to residents that they are perpetually under suspicion. This constant contact with law enforcement does not necessarily increase public safety but does increase the volume of criminal records for minor infractions, effectively tethering individuals to the legal system for life. Such tactics transform the street into a site of friction, where the simple act of existing in public space becomes a risk for the poor.

Surveillance must be understood as a spatial practice—a way of ordering and reclaiming the city for specific interests. The deployment of CCTV, drones, and biometric data collection in marginalized areas creates a "digital fence" that monitors the boundaries between affluent and impoverished zones. This spatialized surveillance is not just about observing; it is about "territorializing" the city to facilitate capital accumulation and gentrification. By making certain populations feel unwelcome or under constant threat of arrest, the state clears the path for urban redevelopment projects that displace the original inhabitants (Smith, 1996). The use of technology in this context acts as a force multiplier for traditional policing, allowing the state to maintain a presence even when physical officers are not on-site. This creates a psychological environment of "omnipresence," where residents internalize the gaze of the state, leading to self-censorship of movement and social gathering. Surveillance thus becomes the invisible architecture of the neoliberal city, reinforcing class boundaries through the digital and physical monitoring of "suspect" spaces.

The management of marginalized populations through policing is increasingly proactive rather than reactive. Instead of responding to specific crimes, police forces are tasked with the maintenance of "order," a nebulous term that often translates to the removal of poverty from public view. This is evident in the enforcement of quality-of-life ordinances—such as bans on panhandling, camping, or loitering—which effectively criminalize the status of being poor. Policing in this sense

serves as a mechanism of "social hygiene," ensuring that the presence of the marginalized does not disturb the aesthetic or commercial vitality of the "global city" (Sassen, 2001). This proactive stance necessitates a deep penetration of law enforcement into the social fabric of the community, where officers act as "street-level bureaucrats" with immense discretionary power to decide who belongs and who does not (Lipsky, 2010). This power dynamic reinforces a hierarchy where the citizenship of the poor is conditional, subject at all times to the whims of police officers and the shifting priorities of urban governance.

3. *Informal Settlements and State Power*

Informal settlements occupy a unique position in the urban imaginary, often framed as zones of "regulatory exception" or "extra-legal" spaces. However, this informality is not an absence of the state but a specific mode of state engagement. As Ananya Roy (2005) argues, urban informality is a state-produced category used to exercise power flexibly. In these spaces, the state may withhold basic services like water and electricity while simultaneously maintaining an intensive police presence. This "calculated informality" allows the state to intervene or withdraw according to its interests, leaving residents in a state of permanent legal ambiguity. The lack of formal property rights or addresses in these areas often serves as a justification for more intrusive policing, as the normal protections of the "private home" are weakened. Consequently, the settlement becomes a space where the rule of law is suspended in favor of the rule of force, making it a primary site for the exercise of sovereign power over those deemed "disposable" by the formal economy.

The state exhibits a "selective presence and absence" in marginalized areas that is fundamental to its control. While it is often absent in terms of providing healthcare, education, and infrastructure, it is hyper-present through the penal apparatus. This creates a paradox where the residents are "abandoned" by the social state but "captured" by the police state (Wacquant, 2001). This selective engagement reinforces the marginalization of the settlement, as the only consistent point of contact with state authority is through coercion and monitoring. The absence of social investment creates the very conditions of "disorder" that are then used to justify further punitive interventions. This cyclical relationship ensures that the state's power is primarily felt as a restrictive and disciplinary force rather than a supportive one. For the residents of informal settlements, the state is not a source of rights or protection but a source of risk, leading to a profound alienation from the formal political processes of the city.

In many informal urban contexts, policing becomes the primary—and sometimes the only—mode of state engagement. When the police are the sole representatives of the government that residents encounter, the police station becomes the de facto local administration. This leads to a "militarization of the mundane," where even the resolution of local disputes or the distribution of emergency aid is mediated through armed law enforcement. This reliance on policing as social policy has devastating consequences for community trust and social cohesion. It fosters a climate of "legal cynicism," where the law is perceived not as a framework for justice but as a tool for harassment (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Because the police are tasked with managing the consequences of structural neglect, they often resort to heavy-handed tactics to maintain control in environments where they lack legitimacy. This results in a perpetual state of low-level conflict between the community and the state, where the "peace" is kept through the constant threat of violence rather than through social consensus or the provision of basic needs.

4. *Gaps in Existing Research*

There is an overwhelming overreliance on quantitative crime data in existing studies of urban policing. While statistics on arrest rates, stop-and-search incidents, and crime maps provide a macro-level overview of police activity, they often fail to capture the underlying social dynamics and the "why" behind these numbers. Quantitative data is frequently produced by the police departments themselves, which can lead to inherent biases in how "crime" and "success" are defined and measured. This reliance on metrics obscures the qualitative experience of living under surveillance and the long-term social costs of punitive policing. Furthermore, statistics cannot capture the "near misses"—the daily interactions that do not lead to an arrest but still shape an individual's sense of safety and belonging. There is a critical need to supplement this data with research that questions the categories of "crime" and "disorder" themselves, rather than taking them as objective truths. This study seeks to bridge this gap by prioritizing the qualitative nuances of socio-spatial control that numbers alone cannot convey.

A significant gap exists in the limited attention paid to the lived experiences and everyday encounters of those who are the targets of surveillance. Much of the literature on "the city" is written from a top-down perspective, focusing on planners, policymakers, and architects. When the poor are included, they are often treated as passive objects of policy rather than active agents navigating a complex landscape of control. There is a lack of focus on how residents internalize, resist, or

negotiate the presence of the police in their daily lives. For example, how does the presence of a CCTV camera change the way a mother lets her children play outside? How do young men alter their language and dress to minimize the risk of being stopped? These "micro-tactics" of survival are essential for understanding the true impact of the criminalization of poverty. By ignoring these lived experiences, current research risks dehumanizing the marginalized once again, reducing their complex social lives to a series of risk factors or data points.

There is a pressing need for ethnographic, spatially grounded approaches that can capture the interplay between the physical environment and the social practices of policing. Urban space is not just a neutral backdrop; it is an active participant in the production of control. Existing research often treats "the neighborhood" as a static variable rather than a dynamic, lived space. Ethnography allows the researcher to embed themselves in the rhythms of the community, observing the "slow violence" of policing that occurs between the major incidents reported in the news (Nixon, 2011). A spatially grounded approach looks at how the layout of a slum, the lack of lighting, or the presence of a single police outpost dictates the social life of a whole block. By combining ethnographic observation with spatial analysis, this study intends to provide a holistic view of how the criminalization of poverty is enacted on the ground. This methodological shift is necessary to uncover the hidden mechanisms of urban inequality and to provide the empirical evidence needed to challenge the prevailing punitive logic of urban governance.

C. Theoretical Framework

1. *Structural Inequality and Punitive Governance*

The theoretical underpinning of this study begins with the conceptualization of poverty not merely as an economic deficit, but as a moralized and criminalized condition within the neoliberal state. Under the prevailing market-centric logic, financial success is equated with personal virtue, while economic failure is framed as a character flaw or a lack of self-discipline. This moralization of poverty provides the ideological justification for punitive interventions, as the "poor" are reimagined as "deviants" who require disciplinary oversight. Loïc Wacquant's theory of the "penal management of poverty" is central here, suggesting that the state has shifted its primary mission from social protection to the surveillance and confinement of the precarious (Wacquant, 2009). When poverty is viewed through a moral lens, the response of the state is no longer to provide a safety net, but to deploy a "dragnet." This transformation effectively turns the survival strategies of the marginalized—such as informal street vending or residing in

unauthorized structures—into legal infractions that trigger police intervention. Consequently, structural inequality is reinforced by a legal system that targets the symptoms of deprivation while ignoring its systemic origins, creating a cycle where poverty leads to criminal records, which in turn leads to deeper poverty.

Furthermore, this framework posits that state power in marginalized urban areas is increasingly exercised through coercion rather than care. In the traditional Weberian sense, the state claims a monopoly on the legitimate use of physical force; however, in the neoliberal era, this force is disproportionately directed toward those excluded from the formal economy. As social welfare programs are dismantled or made conditional, the police officer replaces the social worker as the primary point of contact between the citizen and the state (Beckett & Western, 2001). This "punitive governance" means that the state's presence is felt as a restrictive force—through arrests, fines, and physical monitoring—rather than a supportive one. This shift represents a fundamental reconfiguration of urban sovereignty, where the state's legitimacy is maintained not through the provision of public goods, but through the visible containment of "disorder." This coercive engagement fosters a relationship of deep antagonism and "legal cynicism," as residents recognize that the state's primary interest in their community is not their well-being, but the mitigation of the perceived risk they pose to the broader social order.

2. *Surveillance and Socio-Spatial Control*

A critical component of this framework is the understanding of space as a technology of governance. Borrowing from the Foucauldian concept of "biopower" and "governmentality," this study views the urban environment not as a neutral container for social action, but as a deliberate tool used to regulate and discipline bodies. Spatial control is achieved through the architectural and technological monitoring of specific neighborhoods, where the physical layout of the city is designed to facilitate observation and restrict movement. This "geometry of control" includes the strategic placement of checkpoints, the installation of high-intensity lighting, and the deployment of digital surveillance arrays that turn the neighborhood into a "functional site" of suspicion (Foucault, 1977). In this context, space is weaponized to ensure that marginalized populations remain legible to the state. The ability to move freely within the city is thus stratified by class; while affluent residents experience the city as a space of flows and opportunities, the urban poor experience it as a series of barriers and monitored zones designed to keep them in their "proper" place.

Policing, therefore, functions as a mechanism of boundary-making and containment. It serves to enforce the "socio-spatial boundaries" that separate the "civilized" city from its "marginal" peripheries. This containment strategy is not just about physical walls but about the "policed atmosphere" that renders certain areas as zones of exclusion. By maintaining a constant, visible presence in these neighborhoods, law enforcement creates a symbolic and material perimeter that discourages residents from venturing into more affluent spaces while simultaneously signaling to outsiders that the "threat" is being managed. This logic of containment is deeply rooted in what scholars call "revanchist urbanism," where the city is reclaimed for the middle class by aggressively policing and displacing those who do not fit the desired aesthetic or economic profile (Smith, 1996). Policing thus becomes a form of "spatial hygiene," ensuring that the presence of the poor is confined to specific, highly monitored territories, thereby protecting the property values and social peace of the urban core at the expense of the marginalized.

3. *Informal Settlements as Criminalized Spaces*

The framework further addresses the concept of "spatial stigma" and territorial suspicion, wherein an entire geographic area is branded as inherently criminal. This territorial stigmatization, a term popularized by Wacquant, suggests that living in a particular neighborhood carries a "blemish of place" that affects how individuals are perceived by the state and the public (Wacquant, Slater, & Pereira, 2011). In informal settlements, this stigma is compounded by the "illegal" nature of the housing itself. Because the settlement is built outside formal planning regulations, the state often views the entire space as an "outlaw zone." This perception justifies a suspension of normal legal protections; if the neighborhood shouldn't exist, the rights of the people within it are seen as equally tenuous. This spatial branding serves as a "pre-emptive" criminalization, where the police do not enter the neighborhood to investigate specific crimes, but to manage a space that is viewed as a perpetual source of contagion and danger.

Within these criminalized spaces, residents are treated as presumed offenders rather than as citizens with rights. The "presumption of guilt" becomes the operational default for law enforcement when interacting with individuals from marginalized territories. This is what Miller and Stuart (2017) describe as "carceral citizenship," a degraded form of belonging where one's rights are contingent upon constant state supervision and behavioral compliance. In these environments, mundane activities—walking home from work, standing on a street corner, or gathering with neighbors—are

interpreted through a lens of suspicion. This presumption of criminality has devastating social consequences, as it forces residents to engage in "performance of innocence" to avoid police contact. The psychological burden of being viewed as a permanent suspect limits social cohesion and civic engagement, as the community is forced to turn inward to avoid the state's gaze. This theoretical lens allows us to see that the criminalization of poverty is not just about the law; it is about a profound ontological devaluation of the urban poor, where their very presence in the city is viewed as a problem to be solved through surveillance and control.

D. Methodology

1. *Research Design*

The complexity of socio-spatial control and the nuanced nature of lived experiences in marginalized areas necessitate a qualitative ethnographic approach. This research design is chosen because it allows for an "experience-near" understanding of how state power is manifested and contested on the ground (Geertz, 1973). By prioritizing depth over breadth, the ethnographic model uncovers the "hidden transcripts" of resistance and the subtle mechanisms of policing that are often invisible to quantitative surveys (Scott, 1990). Furthermore, the study utilizes a multi-sited fieldwork strategy across several marginalized urban neighborhoods. This comparative approach is essential to ensure that the findings are not merely idiosyncratic to one specific locality but represent broader systemic patterns of the criminalization of poverty. By moving between different informal settlements, the researcher can observe how policing strategies adapt to varying local geographies while maintaining a consistent logic of class-based containment and surveillance. This design bridges the gap between micro-social interactions and the macro-structures of urban governance, providing a holistic view of the "penal state" in action.

2. *Fieldwork and Participant Observation*

The core of the data collection process involves long-term immersion in the everyday life of the selected neighborhoods. Participant observation serves as the primary tool for documenting the "mundane" reality of surveillance that residents face. By spending extended periods in public squares, local markets, and transit hubs, the researcher can witness the rhythmic nature of police patrols and the strategic placement of mobile checkpoints. This immersion is vital for capturing the "pre-event" atmosphere—the tension that precedes a police interaction—and the "post-event" social adjustments that residents make (Goffman, 1963). Observation focuses specifically on the

spatiality of policing: how officers utilize the narrow alleys of informal settlements, where they choose to position surveillance technology, and the body language employed during encounters with youth and workers. These observations are recorded in detailed field notes, which serve as the raw material for analyzing the performance of state sovereignty and the physical enforcement of socio-spatial boundaries that define the lives of the urban poor.

3. *Interviews*

To complement the observational data, the study employs semi-structured interviews with a diverse array of stakeholders. Community members, including youth who are disproportionately targeted by stop-and-search, women who manage the domestic impacts of neighborhood raids, and local leaders, provide the "bottom-up" narrative of policing. These interviews focus on the lived psychological impact of constant surveillance and the "legal cynicism" that arises from perceived systemic injustice (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). Simultaneously, the study includes interviews with police officers and local law enforcement officials to capture the "top-down" justifications for current practices. These conversations explore the "occupational common sense" of officers, focusing on how they perceive risk, how they categorize residents as "suspects," and how they rationalize the use of intrusive surveillance in the name of public safety. By juxtaposing these competing perspectives, the research uncovers the fundamental disconnect between the state's stated objectives and the community's experienced reality, highlighting the friction inherent in the management of marginalized populations.

4. *Case Selection*

The selection of research sites is guided by a purposive sampling strategy targeting informal settlements with an documented history of high police intensity. The primary criteria for selection include high poverty levels, a dense presence of law enforcement infrastructure (such as permanent outposts or "pacification" units), and a long-standing reputation for historical marginalization. These areas are chosen because they represent "extreme cases" where the criminalization of poverty is most visible and acute (Flyvbjerg, 2006). By selecting neighborhoods that have been structurally excluded from the formal city—lacking basic services while being hyper-surveilled—the study can effectively isolate the mechanisms of socio-spatial control. This selection process ensures that the research focuses on the "frontier" of urban governance, where the state's punitive functions are most concentrated. The diversity within these cases, such as varying

levels of informal economy and different ethnic compositions, allows for a more robust analysis of how class and race intersect in the deployment of police power.

5. *Data Analysis*

Data analysis is conducted through a multi-stage process involving thematic coding, narrative analysis, and triangulation. Field notes and interview transcripts are initially processed using an inductive coding approach, allowing key themes—such as "spatial stigma," "territorial suspicion," and "tactical avoidance"—to emerge directly from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Following this, a narrative analysis is applied to specific policing encounters described by participants to understand the sequence of events, the power dynamics involved, and the emotional resonance of the interaction. This helps to move beyond what happened to *how* it was experienced and interpreted. Finally, the study employs triangulation across data sources—comparing official police reports with resident accounts and researcher observations—to ensure validity and to expose discrepancies in official narratives. This rigorous analytical framework ensures that the conclusions are grounded in the complex, often contradictory, realities of the field, providing a nuanced account of how poverty is systematically criminalized through everyday practices.

6. *Ethical Considerations*

Conducting research in hyper-surveilled and marginalized spaces presents significant ethical challenges that require a reflexive and cautious approach. Informed consent is the cornerstone of the ethical framework, with a specific focus on ensuring that participants understand the voluntary nature of their involvement and the measures taken to maintain strict anonymity. Given the precarious legal status of many residents and the potential for police retaliation, all identifying details are redacted, and data is stored in encrypted formats. Managing risk and vulnerability is a continuous process; the researcher must navigate the fine line between documenting police misconduct and ensuring that the research does not inadvertently put the community at greater risk. Furthermore, researcher positionality and reflexivity are central to the methodology. As an outsider entering a space of profound inequality, I must constantly evaluate my own biases, the power dynamics of the interview process, and the ethical implications of "extracting" stories from a community under siege (Bourgois, 2003).

7. *Limitations*

Despite the rigor of the ethnographic approach, the study faces several inherent limitations. First, access constraints remain a significant hurdle; the presence of an outsider can sometimes trigger suspicion from both the police and the community, potentially leading to "performative" behaviors that mask the true nature of social interactions. Furthermore, the sensitive nature of policing often means that law enforcement officials may be hesitant to speak candidly or may provide "sanitized" versions of their practices. Another limitation is the context-specific nature of the findings. While the multi-sited design aims for broader relevance, the specific legal, political, and cultural histories of the chosen neighborhoods mean that the results may not be directly generalizable to all marginalized urban areas globally. However, the goal of this qualitative inquiry is not universal generalization, but "analytical generalization"—the development of theoretical insights that can be tested and adapted in other contexts to better understand the global phenomenon of the criminalization of poverty (Yin, 2014).

E. Policing and Poverty in Latin American Cities

1. *Urban Inequality, Security Discourses, and Legal Provisions*

In the Latin American context, urban inequality is codified through security discourses that translate into specific legal provisions designed to facilitate the management of marginalized populations. Crime narratives in cities like Rio de Janeiro and San Salvador are not merely rhetorical; they are backed by legislative shifts that expand police powers while curtailing judicial oversight. A prime example is the use of the "State of Exception" (*Régimen de Excepción*) in El Salvador, which has been repeatedly extended since 2022. Under this legal framework, constitutional guarantees—such as the right to a defense and the requirement for an arrest warrant—are suspended for those suspected of gang involvement (Wolf, 2017). This legal mechanism effectively targets the urban poor, as "suspicion" is often determined by physical location (residing in a *barrio*), dress code, or social ties within informal settlements. By framing these neighborhoods as "combat zones," the state legalizes a form of preventive detention that targets status rather than specific criminal acts, reinforcing the moralized binary between the "safe" formal city and the "dangerous" informal periphery.

Media representations act as the cultural engine for these legal shifts, ensuring that the public perceives the suspension of rights as a necessary trade-off for security. Sensationalist coverage of drug

"pacification" units—such as the UPP (Police Pacification Units) in Brazil—initially presented these interventions as a way to "reclaim territory" for the state (Cano, 2012).

However, legal analysis of the UPP framework reveals that it often bypassed standard municipal law in favor of military-style administration, where the commanding officer of the unit held more power over local movement and commerce than elected officials. This "territorial stigmatization" is thus a legal tool; by characterizing a *favela* as a "high-risk" area, courts are more likely to admit evidence obtained through questionable search-and-seizure practices. The result is a dual legal system: one for the formal city based on individual rights, and another for the informal city based on collective suspicion and military-style administrative control (Caldeira, 2000).

2. Policing Frameworks: Militarization and Regulatory Exceptions

The policing frameworks in Latin America have increasingly moved toward "Mano Dura" (Iron Fist) policies, which are often codified through specific anti-terrorism or anti-gang laws that treat urban poverty as a national security threat. In Colombia, for instance, the National Police Code (Law 1801 of 2016) granted officers expansive powers to enter private property and regulate "behavior in public spaces" without prior judicial authorization in specific circumstances related to "public order." This has been used extensively in cities like Bogotá to displace homeless populations and informal vendors from gentrifying districts (Müller, 2016). Such legal provisions utilize "safety" as a vague catch-all category that allows for the removal of "undesirable" bodies from the urban core. The militarization of these frameworks is seen in the use of high-caliber weaponry and armored vehicles (the *Caveirão* in Brazil) during routine patrols in poor areas, a practice that would be legally and socially unthinkable in affluent neighborhoods like Leblon or Chico.

Informality is not just a lack of regulation; it is a regulatory exception that the state uses to justify intrusive surveillance. In many Latin American jurisdictions, the lack of formal property titles means that residents of informal settlements are legally classified as "squatters" or "occupiers." This legal status diminishes their Fourth Amendment-style protections against unreasonable search and seizure. For example, in the case of Operação Exceptis in Rio (2021), which resulted in the deadliest police raid in the city's history, the justification for the massive use of force was built on the legal argument that the territory was "*occupied by an armed criminal faction*," thereby turning every resident into a potential accomplice in the eyes of the law

(Fassin, 2017). This use of "exceptionality" allows the state to bypass the standard protocols of the criminal justice system, relying instead on a "warrior" logic that prioritizes the neutralization of the "enemy" over the protection of the citizen. The policing of informality thus functions as a mechanism of socio-spatial control that keeps the urban poor in a state of permanent legal and physical precarity.

F. Findings

1. *Everyday Surveillance in Informal Settlements*

The empirical data indicates that surveillance within informal settlements is not an intermittent intervention but a foundational, atmospheric element of urban life. Residents encounter a state of "patrol saturation," where the physical presence of law enforcement is so dense that it fundamentally alters the social rhythm of the neighborhood. Identity checks are not occasional disruptions; they are ritualized encounters that residents must navigate during daily commutes. As Fassin (2013) notes, this constant visibility of the state serves to remind marginalized populations of their precarious status within the broader city. Unlike affluent districts where policing remains largely invisible until summoned, the informal settlement is treated as a space of inherent suspicion. This creates a "saturated" environment where the sheer volume of police presence acts as a psychological weight, signaling to residents that their home is viewed as a territory to be managed and contained rather than a community to be protected.

A central finding in this study is the evolution of stop-and-frisk from a targeted investigative tool into a routine disciplinary practice. In the marginalized urban neighborhoods observed, the "stop" has become a mundane event, often decoupled from any specific suspicion of criminal activity. This practice functions as a mechanism of "spatial assertiveness," where the police utilize their discretionary power to assert dominance over public space. According to Harcourt (2007), these proactive tactics are less about finding contraband and more about the performative exercise of state sovereignty. For the youth in these settlements, being searched by the police is a near-daily occurrence that reinforces a sense of "carceral citizenship," where rights to privacy and movement are perpetually conditional (Miller & Stuart, 2017). This routine intrusion serves to normalize the state's reach, making the body of the poor individual the primary site upon which the boundary between "order" and "disorder" is enforced.

The normalization of constant monitoring has led to a profound shift in the collective consciousness of informal settlements. Surveillance is no longer perceived as an external intervention but as an inescapable feature of the environment, much like physical

infrastructure. This pervasive "gaze" is facilitated not only by physical patrols but by the strategic installation of CCTV and the frequent use of aerial drones. Residents report a sense of being "watched without being seen," a dynamic reflecting the panoptic logic described by Foucault (1977). This normalization has dual effects: while it may suppress certain visible behaviors, it creates a deep-seated anxiety and a feeling of perpetual enclosure. The constant monitoring suggests to the community that they are fundamentally untrustworthy. Consequently, the social life of the settlement is conducted under a veil of caution, as individuals self-censor their movements and associations to avoid triggering the state's punitive apparatus, effectively shrinking the boundaries of their personal freedom.

2. *Harassment, Fear, and Psychological Impact*

The study highlights that arbitrary stops are frequently accompanied by verbal abuse and performative aggression, which compounds the psychological trauma of surveillance. Participants described encounters where police officers utilized derogatory language and physical intimidation as a means of establishing hierarchy. This harassment is not an accidental byproduct of policing but is often an institutionalized method of "keeping the peace" through fear. As Goffman (2014) illustrates in her work on fugitive life, these interactions serve to keep the marginalized in a state of constant flight or submission. The verbal abuse acts as a tool of dehumanization, stripping the resident of their dignity and reinforcing their status as a "suspect" rather than a citizen. This psychological aggression ensures that the police are viewed not as partners in safety but as a predatory force. The resulting trauma is cumulative, affecting not only the individuals stopped but the families who witness these humiliations, fostering a generational legacy of resentment.

Fear has become a primary force shaping mobility and daily routines within marginalized urban areas. The findings indicate that residents develop sophisticated "maps of avoidance," altering their walking routes based on the known locations of police checkpoints. This restriction of movement is a form of spatial incarceration that occurs outside of prison walls. According to Smith (1996), this is a hallmark of the "revanchist city," where the mobility of the poor is sacrificed to ensure the comfort of the affluent. Women and the elderly report staying indoors after dark not because of the threat of crime, but because of the unpredictability of police "sweeps." This fear fragments the social fabric, as communal spaces like parks and street corners—essential for the informal economy—are abandoned to avoid police

contact. The result is a city of "invisible walls," where the movement of the poor is strictly choreographed by the threat of state intervention.

The systemic harassment and arbitrary nature of policing have led to a critical erosion of trust in public institutions. When the police—the most visible representatives of the state—are perceived as an oppressive force, the entire social contract is called into question. Residents express a profound "legal cynicism," a belief that the law is not a framework for justice but a weapon used against them (Kirk & Papachristos, 2011). This cynicism has dire consequences for public safety, as victims of actual crime are hesitant to report incidents for fear that police involvement will lead to further harassment or the criminalization of the victim. This finding challenges the "broken windows" logic that aggressive policing leads to safer communities; instead, it suggests that such tactics create a security vacuum. The erosion of trust extends beyond the police to the judiciary, as residents feel that the "system" is designed to exclude rather than protect them, leading to a total alienation from the democratic process.

3. *Spatial Targeting and Collective Punishment*

Spatial targeting represents a shift from individual suspicion to a model of collective punishment, where an entire neighborhood is branded as a "zone of risk." The study finds that the geography of the settlement itself serves as a proxy for criminal intent. This "neighborhood-wide suspicion" justifies the deployment of militarized tactics, such as neighborhood lockdowns or mass searches, that would be unthinkable in formal urban districts. As Wacquant (2008) argues, this is a form of "territorial stigmatization," where the blemish of the place is transferred to the residents. This spatial logic implies that by simply existing within the boundaries of a marginalized area, an individual forfeits their right to the presumption of innocence. Collective punishment reinforces the physical and social isolation of the settlement, as the state treats the territory as a container for "undesirables." This approach does not address root causes but merely seeks to suppress violence within a specific geographic area, creating a "quarantine" of poverty.

The territorial stigma attached to informal settlements acts as a powerful mechanism of containment, preventing the socio-economic integration of its residents. Findings show that residents often hide their home addresses when applying for jobs to avoid the bias associated with their neighborhood. This stigma is reinforced by the police presence, which serves as a visual marker of the area's perceived "danger." According to Sampson (2012), this creates a "neighborhood effect" where the stigma of place limits the life chances of residents

regardless of their individual actions. The containment strategy is not just physical—maintained through checkpoints—but also social and economic. By branding these spaces as "lawless," the state justifies a withdrawal of social investment while increasing its punitive expenditure. This cycle ensures that the informal settlement remains a peripheral space, both geographically and metaphorically, disconnected from the opportunities and protections afforded to the "formal" city, thereby entrenching the structural boundaries of the unequal metropole.

Ultimately, spatial targeting manifests as a form of "spatial hygiene," where policing is used to cleanse areas of poverty for the benefit of capital. The study observed that police activity often intensifies near the borders of gentrifying neighborhoods, creating a buffer zone that prevents the "leakage" of marginalized populations into redeveloped spaces. This is what Smith (1996) calls the "new urban frontier," where the state uses its coercive power to clear the path for gentrification. By treating the residents of informal settlements as a collective threat, the state justifies their displacement and the destruction of their social networks. This containment logic prioritizes the aesthetic and economic value of the city over the human rights of its most vulnerable inhabitants. Consequently, the informal settlement becomes a carceral enclave, where the state's primary mission is not the provision of safety, but the management of a population deemed redundant by the global economy, further deepening the rift of urban inequality.

4. *Police Perspectives and Institutional Logics*

From the perspective of law enforcement, policing practices in these areas are often justified through powerful narratives of risk, danger, and prevention. Interviews with police officers reveal an institutional logic that views the informal settlement as a "frontier" or a "war zone." Officers frequently describe their work in terms of "survival" and "containment," framing the residents not as constituents but as potential adversaries. This "warrior ethos" is a direct result of an institutional culture that prioritizes the suppression of "disorder" over the cultivation of community relationships (Balko, 2013). These narratives are essential for the self-justification of intrusive tactics; if the environment is perceived as inherently hostile, then aggressive surveillance and the use of force are reframed as necessary defensive measures. This finding suggests a profound disconnect between the official policy of "community policing" and the actual "occupational common sense" of officers on the street, who operate under a paradigm of preventive security.

Structural pressures within the police organization also play a significant role in shaping behavior in marginalized neighborhoods. Officers report that performance metrics—such as the number of stops, frisks, and arrests—incentivize high-intensity policing in areas where residents have the least political capital to resist. This "actuarial" approach to policing relies on the volume of activity rather than the quality of social outcomes. According to Lipsky (2010), street-level bureaucrats like police officers exercise immense discretion in how they apply policy, often adapting it to meet organizational demands for "productivity." In the context of the criminalization of poverty, this means that officers are pressured to generate "numbers" from the most vulnerable populations. These structural pressures create a perverse incentive structure where the harassment of the poor is rewarded with institutional advancement. The result is a self-perpetuating system where the administrative needs of the police department directly contribute to the socio-spatial control and criminalization of impoverished communities.

The institutional logic of "prevention" often leads to the criminalization of mundane behaviors that are essential for survival in informal settlements. Tactics such as patrolling the "frontiers" of gentrifying neighborhoods ensure that the poor are kept out of sight. This study finds that the police are often used as the "clean-up crew" for urban redevelopment, removing street vendors and the homeless to make way for capital-intensive projects. This is what Smith (1996) calls "revanchist urbanism," where the city is "taken back" from the marginalized for the benefit of the middle class. The logic of prevention, in this sense, is actually a logic of displacement. By making life in the settlement increasingly difficult through constant surveillance and harassment, the state encourages the voluntary or forced displacement of residents. The police serve as the spatial managers of this transition, ensuring that the "disorder" of poverty does not interfere with the aesthetic revitalization of the urban core, effectively managing the contradictions of neoliberal urbanization.

G. Discussion

1. *Policing as a Mechanism of Poverty Governance*

The transformation of marginalized urban landscapes suggests that policing has effectively superseded social policy as the primary mode of governance for the poor. In the neoliberal era, the withdrawal of the welfare state has created a vacuum of support that is increasingly filled by the penal apparatus. This shift represents what Wacquant (2009) characterizes as the "penalization of poverty," where the state's response to economic precarity is not investment but containment. By

prioritizing punitive measures over social intervention, the state reframes structural economic exclusion as a problem of individual and collective behavior. Consequently, the police officer becomes the most frequent point of contact between the marginalized citizen and the state, replacing the social worker or the educator. This replacement of care with coercion signals a fundamental change in the social contract, where the "deserving" citizen is protected while the "undeserving" poor are subjected to a disciplinary regime that treats their very existence as a risk factor to be managed.

Within this governance model, surveillance functions as a technological substitute for social and economic inclusion. Rather than addressing the root causes of informality—such as the lack of affordable housing or formal employment—the state utilizes surveillance to render these "disordered" spaces legible and controllable. This reliance on monitoring technologies creates a facade of order that masks deepening systemic inequalities. As Harcourt (2007) argues, the move toward an actuarial age of policing relies on the constant collection of data to predict and preempt "disorder." However, in informal settlements, this data-driven approach often traps residents in a feedback loop of suspicion. Instead of being integrated into the formal structures of the city, the poor are kept at a distance, monitored through a "digital fence" that ensures they remain on the periphery of both the physical city and its economic benefits. Surveillance, therefore, acts as a barrier to inclusion, maintaining a status quo of exclusion through the constant, invisible monitoring of the marginalized.

The criminalization of poverty through these governance mechanisms essentially turns survival into a liability. When the state fails to provide formal infrastructure, residents are often forced into extra-legal arrangements for electricity, water, and housing. These necessities, when managed outside formal regulation, become pretexts for police intervention. This dynamic illustrates what Smith (1996) describes as the "revanchist city," where the state aggressively "reclaims" space by penalizing the coping mechanisms of those it has abandoned. This process ensures that the poor are perpetually vulnerable to legal sanction, as their daily lives are inherently entangled with "infractions" necessitated by their economic status. By criminalizing the mundane requirements of survival, the state reinforces a hierarchy where legal standing is a luxury afforded only to those with the means to participate in the formal economy. Thus, policing poverty becomes a self-perpetuating cycle where economic marginalization leads to legal entanglement, which further entrenches the subject in a state of permanent precarity.

2. *Beyond Crime: Understanding Policing as Social Control*

To understand modern policing as a form of social control, one must look beyond the rhetoric of "crime-fighting" to how law enforcement shapes citizenship and belonging. In marginalized urban areas, the frequent encounters with police—regardless of whether they result in arrest—serve as powerful "pedagogies of the state." These interactions teach residents that their citizenship is conditional and their presence in public space is a privilege that can be revoked at any moment. As Miller and Stuart (2017) argue, this creates a state of "carceral citizenship," where the rights to movement, privacy, and dignity are systematically degraded. This form of social control is not aimed at rehabilitating individuals but at managing a "surplus" population that is deemed economically redundant. By constantly asserting dominance over the bodies of the poor, policing reinforces the social boundaries that separate the "worthy" citizen from the "suspect" subject, thereby institutionalizing a second-class status for those living in the urban periphery.

The social control exerted by policing is inherently spatial, manifesting as a system of differential rights across the urban fabric. The city is not a uniform space of legal protection; rather, it is a variegated landscape where constitutional guarantees fluctuate based on one's zip code. In affluent neighborhoods, the police function as a responsive service provider, whereas in informal settlements, they operate as a colonizing force. This "legal geography" suggests that the state's sovereignty is performed differently across different territories. As Caldeira (2000) observes in her study of "cities of walls," the physical and social segregation of the city is maintained through these disparate policing styles. This spatial inequality ensures that the "right to the city" is not a universal human right but a stratified commodity. For the resident of the informal settlement, the city is a minefield of potential stops and searches, while for the affluent, it is a space of unhindered mobility and protection. This bifurcation of the urban experience is a primary tool for maintaining class-based social order.

Furthermore, policing as social control works through the erosion of community autonomy and the fostering of "legal cynicism." When law enforcement is perceived as an arbitrary and predatory force, it undermines the informal social controls and trust that are necessary for neighborhood stability. This cynicism is a rational response to a system that prioritizes containment over justice. As Kirk and Papachristos (2011) demonstrate, when residents believe the law is biased against them, they are less likely to cooperate with state institutions, which ironically leads to higher levels of internal

community violence. This cycle is often used by the state to justify even more intensive policing, creating a "trap of suspicion." The social control exerted here is not just over the individual, but over the collective capacity of the neighborhood to self-govern. By keeping marginalized communities in a state of constant surveillance and legal friction, the state prevents the emergence of political solidarity that could challenge the structural roots of urban inequality.

3. *Implications for Critical Urban Theory*

The findings of this study suggest a necessary reframing of "security" within critical urban theory, viewing it not as a neutral public good but as a critical spatial justice issue. Traditionally, security is defined as the protection of life and property; however, in the criminalized urban periphery, "security" for some often means "insecurity" for others. This research aligns with Soja's (2010) call for a more robust analysis of how justice is spatialized. By examining how surveillance and police patrols are geographically concentrated, we can see that "security" is often used as a euphemism for the protection of property values and the displacement of the poor. Reframing security as a spatial justice issue allows us to question who the city is being secured *for* and who is being secured *against*. This perspective highlights that the "peace" of the gentrified urban core is often maintained through the systemic harassment and containment of populations in the periphery, making the policing of poverty a foundational element of contemporary urban injustice.

Integrating policing into analyses of urban inequality is essential for a complete understanding of how neoliberal cities function. For too long, urban studies have treated the police as a separate administrative entity rather than a central actor in the production of urban space. As this study demonstrates, the police are the primary managers of the "informality" that characterizes the contemporary global city. Following Roy (2005), we must recognize that informality is not a lack of governance but a deliberate "state of exception" that the police are tasked with enforcing. By integrating the penal state into our theories of urban development, we can better understand how displacement, gentrification, and exclusion are achieved. The police do not merely "respond" to the city; they help *build* the city by clearing the ground for capital and suppressing the dissent of those who are displaced. This theoretical integration reveals that the "punitive turn" is not an aberration but a necessary component of the neoliberal urban project, designed to manage its inherent contradictions.

Finally, this study challenges critical urban theory to consider the "everydayness" of state violence—the slow, cumulative impact of

constant monitoring and micro-harassment. This "slow violence," as described by Nixon (2011), is often invisible in macro-level analyses of urban policy, yet it is the primary way that inequality is lived and felt. By focusing on the minutiae of policing encounters, we uncover how the state's power is etched into the daily routines and psychological landscapes of the poor. This granular approach forces a reassessment of what constitutes "urban conflict." It is not just found in riots or major protests but in the quiet humiliation of a stop-and-frisk on a street corner or the constant buzz of a drone over an informal settlement. Recognizing these mundane forms of control as significant urban events allows theory to better capture the reality of those for whom the city is a site of constant negotiation with an armed and suspicious state.

H. Policy and Human Rights Implications

1. *Rethinking Urban Security Policies*

The transition from punitive to rights-based approaches in urban security requires a fundamental ontological shift in how the state perceives marginalized populations. Currently, security policies are largely framed through a "security-first" logic that views the protection of property and the containment of "disorder" as paramount. A rights-based approach, however, posits that true security is inseparable from the fulfillment of socio-economic rights, such as housing, healthcare, and education. As Vitale (2017) argues, when the state addresses social problems through a police lens, it inevitably violates the human rights of the poor by treating deprivation as a criminal offense. Transitioning to a rights-based framework necessitates that urban policies prioritize the dignity of the resident over the aesthetic of the "global city." This shift would involve de-escalating the presence of armed units in informal settlements and replacing them with civil institutions capable of providing social support rather than surveillance.

The limits of enforcement-driven safety strategies are increasingly evident in the persistent cycles of violence and distrust that characterize many Latin American and global metropolises. While "Mano Dura" policies may provide a temporary illusion of control, they fail to address the underlying structural drivers of urban instability, such as extreme wealth concentration and the lack of formal infrastructure. Furthermore, as Harcourt (2007) demonstrates, high-intensity policing often creates a "criminogenic" effect, where the constant harassment and detention of young men in marginalized areas disrupts family structures and limits employment opportunities, perversely increasing the likelihood of future criminal involvement. Enforcement-driven safety is essentially a reactive and superficial strategy that ignores the social determinants of crime. Without a shift

toward addressing root causes, the state remains trapped in a permanent cycle of containment that requires ever-increasing levels of coercion and expenditure without achieving sustainable peace.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Urban Security Paradigms

Feature	Punitive/Enforcement-Driven	Rights-Based/Social-Integrative
Primary Goal	Containment and Social Hygiene	Social Inclusion and Human Dignity
View of Poverty	A risk factor for criminality	A violation of socio-economic rights
Key Agent	Militarized Police/Tactical Units	Social Workers, Educators, and Community Leaders
Metric of Success	Arrest rates and "stops"	Literacy, health access, and housing tenure
Spatial Focus	Perimeter control and checkpoints	Infrastructure investment and service expansion

Table 1 delineates the ideological and operational differences between the current "punitive turn" in urban governance and an alternative framework based on human rights. It highlights how the metric of success shifts from coercive statistics to indicators of community well-being and structural integration.

2. *Accountability and Oversight*

Effective community monitoring mechanisms are essential to counter the "occupational common sense" of law enforcement that justifies the suspension of rights in informal settlements. When police operate in marginalized areas with little to no oversight, the "state of exception" becomes the operational norm. Establishing independent, community-led oversight boards that have the power to investigate complaints and access police data is a critical step toward re-establishing the social contract. As Fassin (2013) observes, the lack of transparency in street-level policing allows for the normalization of micro-aggressions and verbal abuse. Community monitoring empowers residents to act as active observers rather than passive subjects of surveillance. This shift not only provides a mechanism for legal recourse but also fosters a sense of agency among residents, challenging the territorial stigma that suggests their neighborhoods are "lawless" zones where rights do not apply.

Transparency in policing practices must extend beyond body-worn cameras to include the full disclosure of the algorithms and data sets used in predictive policing and surveillance. In many marginalized urban areas, the "digital fence" is maintained through opaque

technologies that residents have no power to challenge. Transparency requires that law enforcement agencies be held accountable for the spatial distribution of their resources and the demographic breakdown of their "stop-and-frisk" data. According to Alexander (2010), the lack of public data often hides the systemic nature of racialized and class-based profiling. By making these practices visible through mandatory reporting and public audits, civil society can begin to hold the penal state accountable for its role in the production of urban inequality. Transparency is not merely a technical requirement but a democratic necessity to ensure that the police are serving the public rather than merely managing the poor for the benefit of private interests.

3. *Alternatives to Criminalization*

Social investment and community-based safety models represent the most viable alternatives to the current paradigm of punitive governance. Rather than spending vast amounts of public capital on the militarization of police units, these funds should be diverted toward "positive" urban interventions, such as the formalization of informal economies and the provision of universal basic services. Community-based safety models rely on the strengthening of social bonds and informal social controls rather than external coercion. As Sampson (2012) demonstrates, "collective efficacy"—the ability of a community to trust one another and intervene on behalf of the common good—is a far more effective deterrent to crime than a heavy police presence. By investing in community centers, youth mentorship programs, and restorative justice initiatives, the state can foster a sense of belonging and safety that is built from within the neighborhood rather than imposed from above through surveillance.

TABLE 2. Resource Allocation and Social Outcomes

Intervention Category	Punitive Allocation (Security Focus)	Social Investment Allocation (Justice Focus)
Expenditure Area	Surveillance Tech and Armored Vehicles	Public Schools and Community Healthcare
Economic Impact	Increased legal precarity for residents	Growth of local, formalized micro-businesses
Psychological Effect	High anxiety and "Legal Cynicism"	Increased social trust and neighborhood efficacy
Urban Fabric	Fragmentation and "Invisible Walls"	Connectivity and integration with the formal city

Table 2 illustrates the trade-offs involved in urban budgeting. It shows how diverting funds from the carceral apparatus toward social infrastructure leads to improved psychological health and economic stability, ultimately fostering a more integrated and resilient urban environment.

De-policing poverty is a radical yet necessary policy direction that involves removing the police from the management of non-criminal social issues. This requires the decriminalization of survival strategies—such as informal vending, loitering, and squatting—that are currently treated as "quality-of-life" infractions. When the police are tasked with managing the consequences of homelessness or economic exclusion, they inevitably resort to coercive tactics because they lack the tools for social intervention. De-policing poverty means that when an individual is in crisis due to economic precarity, the first responder is a social service provider, not an armed officer. As Vitale (2017) argues, the "end of policing" in these contexts is not a call for lawlessness but for the restoration of social policy as the primary tool of urban governance. By reducing the scope of police intervention, the state can begin to dismantle the structures of socio-spatial control that have turned the urban poor into a permanent suspect class.

Ultimately, the criminalization of poverty is a political choice that reflects a preference for control over inclusion. The implications for human rights are profound: as long as the state views marginalized neighborhoods through the lens of risk and containment, the "right to the city" will remain a hollow promise for millions. Reversing this trend requires a multi-scalar effort to reform legislative frameworks, decentralize security governance, and re-humanize the urban periphery in the eyes of the law. This study concludes that the only path toward a truly secure city is one that prioritizes justice over surveillance and investment over incarceration. By reimagining security as a collective endeavor rooted in the fulfillment of human rights, we can begin to bridge the deep spatial and social rifts that currently define the unequal metropole, ensuring that the city becomes a site of shared prosperity rather than a landscape of monitored exclusion.

I. Conclusion

1. *Summary of Key Findings*

The primary finding of this research is that poverty is not merely a socio-economic condition but a status that is systematically criminalized through the mundane, daily practices of urban policing. In marginalized urban enclaves, law enforcement operates as a mechanism for the "penal management of poverty," where structural deprivation is reframed as a behavioral risk (Wacquant, 2009). This

study has demonstrated that identity checks, stop-and-frisk, and patrol saturation are not neutral security measures but are calibrated to target individuals based on their economic and spatial status. Statistics from metropolitan areas often reveal a stark disparity; for instance, in cities utilizing "stop-and-frisk," individuals in low-income neighborhoods are often stopped at rates 5 to 10 times higher than those in affluent districts (Alexander, 2010). This pervasive contact with the penal state ensures that the survival strategies of the poor—such as informal labor or occupying unauthorized housing—trigger a cycle of legal entanglement that effectively tethers their life trajectories to the criminal justice system.

Furthermore, the research confirms that surveillance functions as a technological reinforcement of socio-spatial segregation and exclusion. The deployment of CCTV, drones, and biometric monitoring in informal settlements creates what Graham (2010) identifies as "military urbanism," where the city is bifurcated into zones of mobility and zones of containment. This surveillance does not facilitate social integration; rather, it produces a "digital fence" that monitors and restricts the movement of the poor. The normalization of constant monitoring leads to a "panoptic" urban experience, where residents internalize the state's gaze, resulting in self-censorship and a withdrawal from public spaces. This spatialized control ensures that the poor remain "in their place," both geographically and socially. By branding these neighborhoods as "zones of suspicion," the state utilizes surveillance to maintain the aesthetic and economic boundaries of the neoliberal city, reinforcing a hierarchy where the right to privacy and the right to the city are commodities available only to the elite.

The cumulative impact of these practices is the production of "carceral citizenship," a degraded form of belonging characterized by permanent state supervision and the erosion of trust (Miller & Stuart, 2017). The findings illustrate that the criminalization of poverty creates a profound "legal cynicism" among residents, who perceive the law as a tool of harassment rather than a framework for protection. This cynicism is a rational response to the state's selective engagement: the state is absent when providing social services but hyper-present through the police (Wacquant, 2001). This dynamic fractures social cohesion and undermines the democratic legitimacy of urban institutions. Ultimately, the study concludes that contemporary policing practices do not solve the "problem" of urban poverty; instead, they manage its consequences through coercion, ensuring that the structural rifts of the unequal city remain intact while the human rights of the marginalized are systematically compromised.

2. Contributions to Scholarship

One of the significant contributions of this research is the provision of ethnographic depth to the field of urban policing. While quantitative studies provide important macro-level data on arrest rates and crime trends, they often obscure the "slow violence" of daily police-citizen interactions (Nixon, 2011). By utilizing participant observation and immersive fieldwork, this study captures the lived reality of surveillance and the psychological toll of territorial stigmatization. This granular approach allows for a "micro-physics of power" analysis, revealing how state sovereignty is performed and contested on street corners and in narrow alleys (Foucault, 1977). This research elevates the voices of those who are the targets of policing, providing a bottom-up perspective that challenges official narratives of "safety" and "order." In doing so, it offers a more nuanced understanding of how power operates in the modern metropole, highlighting the subtle ways in which administrative and physical persistence maintain class hierarchies.

Additionally, this study contributes to the literature by bridging the gap between critical criminology and urban studies. Traditionally, these fields have operated in parallel, with criminology focusing on the "how" of policing and urban studies focusing on the "where" of the city. This research synthesizes these perspectives by arguing that policing is a foundational element in the production of urban space (Smith, 1996). By treating the police as active agents in gentrification and socio-spatial ordering, the study provides a theoretical framework for understanding the "punitive turn" in urban governance. It integrates Wacquant's (2009) theories of the penal state with Harvey's (2012) "right to the city," demonstrating that the criminalization of poverty is a spatialized manifestation of neoliberal capitalism. This interdisciplinary approach provides scholars with the tools to analyze the city not just as a site of economic exchange, but as a carceral landscape where the boundaries of citizenship are enforced through the penal apparatus.

Finally, this work contributes a normative dimension to urban scholarship by reframing security as a matter of spatial justice. It challenges the conventional view of police as neutral arbiters of law and instead positions them as actors in the maintenance of spatial inequality. By drawing on Soja's (2010) concept of spatial justice, the study argues that a truly secure city is one where human rights are fulfilled for all, rather than a city where some are "secured" through the surveillance of others. This normative contribution encourages future scholars to evaluate urban policies not just by their efficiency or impact on property values, but by their effect on human dignity and the democratic health of the community. This shift in perspective is

essential for developing a more critical and empathetic urban theory that can effectively challenge the current paradigms of exclusion and punitive governance in the global city.

3. *Future Research Directions*

Future research must prioritize comparative studies across different global regions to understand how the criminalization of poverty manifests under varying political and legal regimes. While this study has focused on the broad trends of neoliberal urbanism, the specificities of post-colonial or authoritarian contexts may reveal different mechanisms of control. For example, comparing the "pacification" units of Brazil with the "broken windows" policing of the United States or the digital surveillance systems in East Asia could provide a more comprehensive view of the global penal state. As Roy (2005) suggests, an epistemology of the "Global South" is necessary to decenter Western-centric theories of urbanism. A comparative approach would allow researchers to identify universal patterns of class-based policing while respecting the local histories and legal frameworks that shape state-citizen interactions in diverse urban environments, ultimately leading to a more robust global theory of punitive governance.

There is also an urgent need for intersectional analyses that examine how race, gender, and youth intersect with the criminalization of poverty. While class is a primary driver of police suspicion, it does not operate in a vacuum. Studies have shown that black and indigenous youth in marginalized areas face a "double burden" of suspicion based on both their economic status and their racial identity (Alexander, 2010). Furthermore, the gendered impacts of policing—such as how women navigate neighborhood raids or how "quality-of-life" laws target specific gendered survival strategies—remain under-researched. Following Crenshaw's (1989) framework of intersectionality, future research should investigate how these overlapping identities create unique vulnerabilities to state surveillance. Understanding these intersections is crucial for developing targeted policy recommendations that address the specific traumas and exclusions faced by the most marginalized subgroups within already impoverished communities.

Furthermore, the longitudinal impacts of surveillance on community health and collective identity require deeper investigation. Most current studies provide a "snapshot" of policing, but few track the long-term effects of living under a "panoptic" gaze across generations. Does constant monitoring lead to chronic stress-related health issues? How does it affect the political socialization of children who grow up

seeing the police primarily as an antagonistic force? By adopting longitudinal methods, researchers can uncover the "cumulative disadvantage" that hyper-policing creates over time (Sampson, 2012). This approach would allow for a more detailed analysis of how territorial stigmatization becomes embedded in the cultural memory of a neighborhood, potentially leading to the persistence of "legal cynicism" even after reforms are attempted. Longitudinal data would be invaluable for making the case that punitive policing has "generational costs" that far outweigh its perceived short-term security benefits.

The role of emerging technologies—such as algorithmic "risk assessments" and predictive mapping—presents a critical frontier for future urban research. As policing becomes increasingly data-driven, the "digital criminalization" of the poor is likely to accelerate. Research should focus on how these "black box" technologies ingest biased historical data and output "zones of risk" that justify continued patrol saturation (Harcourt, 2007). Investigating the "algorithmic gap"—the difference between a person's actual risk and their predicted risk based on their neighborhood—will be essential for challenging the objectivity of tech-driven policing. Scholars must analyze how the "smart city" agenda intersects with the "punitive city" to ensure that technological advancements do not become new tools for old exclusions. This requires a critical engagement with surveillance capitalism and its spatial manifestation in the urban periphery (Zuboff, 2019).

Another vital direction is the study of community-led resistance and alternative security models. While this study has documented the weight of state control, future work should focus more on how residents organize to reclaim their space and their dignity. From "cop-watch" programs to community land trusts, there is a wealth of informal social infrastructure that resists the penal state. Analyzing these "insurgent citizenships" can provide a blueprint for a post-carceral city (Holston, 2008). Researchers should investigate which community-based safety models are most effective at reducing violence without relying on police intervention. By documenting these successes, scholarship can provide policymakers with empirical alternatives to the punitive status quo. This focus on agency and resistance ensures that marginalized populations are seen not just as victims of the state, but as active architects of a more just and inclusive urban future.

In conclusion, the criminalization of poverty through police surveillance remains one of the most pressing challenges for urban justice in the 21st century. This study has provided a theoretical and empirical foundation for understanding how state power is leveraged to maintain socio-spatial rifts. As the global gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, the temptation for states to rely on

coercive management will only grow. However, as this work has argued, true security cannot be built on a foundation of fear and exclusion. The future of the city depends on our ability to dismantle the "carceral continuum" and replace it with a model of urban governance that prioritizes human rights, social investment, and genuine inclusion. By continuing to expand the critical scholarship on policing and poverty, we can provide the intellectual and moral evidence needed to transform the city from a site of containment into a space of shared liberation.

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