

Article

# Pocketbook policing: How race shapes municipal reliance on punitive fines and fees in the Chicago suburbs

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## Abstract

This article investigates a trend in the Chicago region that defies conventional accounts of municipal politics and revenue-motivated policing: since the Great Recession, higher-income black suburbs have sharply increased collection of legal fines and fees. To explain this, we draw on a study of municipal officials to develop a *racialization of municipal opportunity* perspective, which highlights how racial segregation in the suburbs intersects with policies that encourage competition over tax revenue to produce fiscal inequalities that fall along racial lines. Officials across the region shared views about ‘good’ revenues like sales taxes paid mostly by non-residents, but those in black suburbs were unable to access them and instead turned to ‘bad’ revenues like legal fines to manage fiscal crises—even where residents were fairly affluent and despite the absence of discriminatory intent at the local level. These findings invite inquiry into the racially uneven consequences of seemingly colorblind municipal fiscal practices in the USA and the distributional consequences of municipal governance in other national contexts.

**Key words:** municipal governance, public finance, taxation, racialized institutions, policing

**JEL classification:** Structure, Strategy, and Performance of Government (H11), State and Local Taxation, Subsidies, and Revenue (H71), Fiscal Politics and Behavior (H30)

## 1. Introduction

Aggressive policing in communities of color today lies at the forefront of public discussion about racial injustice in the USA. Following the US Department of Justice’s Ferguson Report (2015), debate of the issue increasingly centers on a phenomenon that we identify as ‘pocketbook policing’: municipal officials’ efforts to raise revenue by extracting money from

residents via legal fines, fees and asset seizures. American municipalities commonly operate their own police departments and sometimes courts and look to these institutions to collect mandatory court surcharges and cash bail, parking and traffic-related fines, excessive user fees associated with court services, and proceeds from the sale of seized assets. At best, such punitive fines and fees diminish household income, constrain economic mobility, and politically disenfranchise the most vulnerable populations (Epp *et al.*, 2014). At worst, they result in legal debts that permanently ensnare many of those targeted, who are vulnerable to ballooning penalties, interest, and often re-arrest (Bannon *et al.*, 2010; Harris *et al.*, 2010, 2017). While existing studies generally characterize punitive fines and fees as a form of racialized punishment and penal expansion (Harris, 2016; Henricks and Harvey, 2017), few studies examine the municipal decision-making processes that fuel pocketbook policing.

In contrast, this article examines when and why municipal officials look to punitive fines and fees as revenue, which illustrates how racialized punishment is enmeshed with the racial economics of place (Lipsitz, 2011; Massey and Denton, 1993). Unlike most existing studies on race and place, we focus especially on suburban areas, where places like Ferguson have grown more racially and economically diverse in recent decades, and increasingly evince the tensions and volatilities of racially discriminatory policing practices (Boyles, 2015; Lung-Amam and Schafran, 2018; Beck, 2019). Based on a mixed-methods study of suburban municipalities in the Chicago metropolitan area, this article investigates a puzzling trend: though most suburbs have slightly increased their collection of fines and tickets in recent decades, the largest increases have occurred in minority suburbs, especially higher income black suburbs.

Existing accounts of revenue-motivated policing explain some of the regions' highest fining suburbs, especially commercial areas where police target nonresidents, and suburbs undergoing a demographic transition that triggers 'racial threat': white residents' tendency to pressure local government to step-up policing of incoming minority populations that they perceive as a threat to their own wellbeing and status (Blalock, 1967; Blauner, 1972; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996; Jacob *et al.*, 2005). But these accounts cannot explain the trend in middle-class black suburbs, which shifted from the region's lowest- to highest-fining suburbs since the 2000s. These include some of the wealthiest black communities in the USA, where officials nevertheless report a level of fiscal distress on par with impoverished communities and turn to pocketbook policing as a last resort. Focusing on local finance officials who are generally far removed from the police beat, we examine this puzzle by drawing from a wide range of materials, including qualitative interviews with municipal officials, budgetary documents and local media stories, analysis of an administrative dataset of fiscal conditions in all 276 Chicago region suburbs, and spatial mapping.

We develop a new conceptual lens for understanding how the interplay of racial segregation and the political economy of local governance shapes the decision making calculus of municipal officials and results in dynamics of punishment that vary along racial lines. Existing perspectives on race and punishment generally focus either on the widening net of penal expansion in the most racially and economically marginalized communities or on the actions of predominately white residents, politicians and law enforcement personnel that police the geographic boundaries that exclude racial minorities from white areas. We argue, however, that a complete account of monetary punishment in the Chicago region requires equal attention to 'opportunity structures', a concept intended to draw attention to the unequal conditions under which people pursue economic mobility and wealth accumulation

(Merton, 1968; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006). Our findings elaborate what we refer to as the *racialization of municipal opportunity*, which highlights the unequal conditions under which black- and white-majority suburbs perform the most basic fiscal responsibilities of local government.

We show that the means for sustaining local government are unevenly distributed primarily along racial rather than economic lines, which accounts for the puzzling reliance on punitive revenue in black middle suburbia. Middle-class suburbs generally strive to attain mainstream ends of good governance and fiscal sustainability, and officials in black and white suburbs alike employ a similar scale of more to less desirable revenues when evaluating local initiatives. As is increasingly the case in American municipalities, Chicago-area municipal officials equate fiscal sustainability with entrepreneurial efforts to attract outside investment (Harvey, 1989). They view revenues derived primarily from nonresidents—like sales and other taxes assessed on commercial activity—as ‘good’, while viewing those that burden residents as ‘bad’. But black middle-class suburbs often struggle to live up to these shared ideals. Situated in racially isolated zones wherein affluent and poverty-stricken municipalities frequently abut (Sharkey, 2014), they have difficulty attracting commercial investment and hence ‘good’ revenues. This relegates black suburbs to an alternative and less desirable pathway of attainment: shut out of access to ‘good’ revenues, officials in black suburbs have recourse only to ‘bad’ revenues. Relative to their counterparts in majority-white suburbs, these officials collect more from their own residents in property taxes, waste more money on failed schemes to attract commercial business, and rely more heavily on punitive revenue.

These findings have implications for students of racial inequities in the USA and suggest that scholars in other national contexts should pay greater attention to the distributional consequences of municipal political economies.

Significantly for scholarship on racial inequities in the USA, we uncover a new pattern of racial stratification between places that results from the intersection of segregation in the suburbs (Lee and Leigh, 2007; Murphy, 2007; Allard, 2017) and fiscal entrepreneurialism (Harvey, 1989; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Peck and tickell, 2002). The effect of this racially uneven access to municipal revenue is to ‘channel unfair gains and unjust enrichments to whites while imposing unearned and unjust obstacles in the way of Blacks’ (Lipsitz, 2011, p. 3). Our findings therefore build on recent work on the racial underpinnings of organizations and institutions (Van Cleve, 2016; Ray, 2019), and add to the chorus of studies that illustrate how black middle-class communities and suburbs face unique constraints on economic mobility (Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Sharkey, 2014), by synthesizing insights from existing work on deviance (Merton, 1968), race and mobility (Oliver and Shapiro, 2006), fiscal sociology (Martin *et al.*, 2009), and municipal politics and finance (Logan and Molotch, 1987; Pacewicz, 2016a). Ultimately, pocketbook policing reflects how racism is baked into the fiscal mechanics of local government, even when residents are fairly affluent and nonwhite officials are at the helm.

Our findings also suggest that students of the municipal governance should pay greater attention to the distributional consequences fiscal governance, both in the USA and in other national contexts. The condition of municipalities in the Chicago region is due to many particular aspects of American federalism, society, and political economy: a lack of federal revenue sharing, the heavy reliance of municipalities on property taxes, their ability to raise a wide range of other revenues, the relative importance of municipal police forces, and high

levels of racial segregation. Systems of municipal finance in other nations show such extreme variation that it is impossible to formulate a single statement about whether similar racialized processes operate in other national contexts. However, at a higher level of abstraction, our analysis of the Chicago region is an extreme case that illustrates a theoretical blind spot in the scholarship on urban governance on politics. Scholars have long argued that systems of municipal finance redistribute resources and are central to regimes of stratification, but they write largely in the Marxist tradition and fixate on the redistribution of resources from citizens to capital. They commonly present the winners of urban politics as a narrow slice of the rentier class—developers, financiers and those with interest in land values—while the losers are society at large (Molotch, 1976; Logan and Molotch, 1987; Harvey, 1989). Our analysis of Chicago illustrates that, on the contrary, systems of municipal finance constitute a conduit of wealth transfer with broad benefits for many residents of white middle-income suburbia, which we believe partially explains the endurance of neoliberal and entrepreneurial urban governance within an American context. In what follows, we first review the legal monetary punishment literature and then develop our alternative perspective.

## 2. The sociology of monetary punishment

A growing literature identifies the imposition of fees, fines and forfeits on marginalized groups as an engine of economic and racial inequity in the USA (Harris *et al.*, 2010, 2017; Bannon *et al.*, 2010). Beyond the false arrests and police-initiated violence that accompanies aggressive law enforcement, monetary sanctions often subject people to permanent debt, limited mobility, ongoing surveillance and re-arrest (Harris *et al.*, 2010). This article builds on the interdisciplinary dialogue around monetary sanctions and racialized policing to elaborate a new perspective highlighting the role of public finance.

### 2.1 Race and the American culture of punishment

Existing studies on legal monetary sanctions focus primarily on law enforcement and the criminal justice apparatus, especially the court system. In particular, criminologists and sociologists of race and crime characterize the heavy fining of marginalized groups specifically as a form of *punishment*, alongside police brutality (Rios, 2011), mass incarceration (Alexander, 2010), the widening net of tough-on-crime surveillance (Stuart, 2016) and the racialized administration of justice (Van Cleve, 2016). This perspective characterizes monetary punishment as a low-cost and self-sustaining punitive option adopted by state lawmakers in response to growing demands for victim's rights and the spiraling costs of criminal justice expansion (Ruback and Bergstrom, 2006; Ruback 2004, 2005; Harris, 2016).

In this way, researchers situate fines and fees as the latest chapter in the evolution of a distinctly racialized American 'culture of punishment' that is oriented toward 'control[ling] and further marginaliz[ing] citizens deemed unworthy of redemption' (Harris, 2016, p. 159). Rooted in white fear of black criminality (Muhammad, 2010), punishment emerged as the dominant vocabulary of racism via the War on Crime and Drugs (Hinton, 2016). From slave and convict leasing in the old American south, to the massive forfeiture of black assets by decoy squads and sting operations during criminal justice expansion in the 60s and 70s,

to today's fines and fees, racialized punishment often entails some degree of financial exploitation.

Echoing these themes, studies of legal monetary sanctions mostly focus on the role of race and criminal justice-related variables. Large *N* studies show that monetary punishment is most prevalent in municipalities that spend more on police activities and those with larger black populations (Henricks and Harvey, 2017; Sances and You, 2017; Goldstein *et al.*, 2018). While this literature illuminates broad patterns, however, it sheds little light on the mechanisms and processes that produce these correlations. Hence, existing accounts conclude that to better understand “the significance of race for city police spending, researchers must also investigate the politics of city government budget-making decisions, [including] the issuance of fines and fees” (Vargas and McHarris, 2017, p. 14), which would require “a more in-depth look at when (and why) city and county government implement monetary punishment” (Henricks and Harvey, 2017, p. 941). Our article takes up this call by highlighting the links between racialized punishment and the racial economics of municipal governance.

## 2.2 Race, place and municipal governance

Analyses of mechanisms and processes serve to ‘open the black box’ of ongoing activities and show how ‘probability statements that [...] state the concurrence or correlation of certain phenomena’ are rooted in human action (Falleti and Lynch, 2009, p. 1146). Whereas studies on monetary punishment highlight how race- and criminal justice-related variables shape local reliance on punitive revenue, we open the black box of municipal decision-making by attending explicitly to the interplay of race, place and local governance suburban Chicago. Notably, the latter today occurs against the backdrop of rapidly growing poverty (Murphy, 2007;<sup>1</sup> Kneebone and Berube, 2013) as well as racial diversity *within* suburbia (Lee and Leigh, 2007; Murphy, 2007). Existing studies offer differing accounts of how dynamics of race and place shape municipal decisions concerning punishment, some of which directly address fines and fees. These prior studies point to different municipal scenarios and settings as likely to produce aggressive policing of racial minorities, including: residents in impoverished nonwhite suburbs, minorities in white suburbs, minorities in demographically transitioning suburbs and all residents—but especially minorities—in commercial suburbs.

First, some studies identify poor nonwhite municipalities as especially prone to aggressive policing. Many nonwhite suburbs today resemble marginalized center-city areas in terms of high poverty and rampant economic disinvestment (Smith *et al.*, 2001; Murphy, 2010), which also—due to compounded disadvantage—makes them vulnerable to high crime, arrest and incarceration rates (Hamer, 2011; Duck, 2015). Such areas serve as extensions of the ‘carceral continuum’ (Shedd 2011; Wacquant 2001), where entire communities are caught in a widening net of criminalization and saturation policing (Clear, 2007; Alexander, 2010; Rios, 2011; Soss and schram 2011; Wacquant, 2009), thereby potentially exposing racial minority suburbanites to aggressive law enforcement and punishment.

1 This does not speak to the broader question of ‘defunding the police.’ Rather, it suggests that—notwithstanding any shifts in municipal funding priorities away from law enforcement—many suburban communities of color are fiscally under-equipped to carry out police reform measures that emphasize better hiring practices.

Second, the demographic shifts underway in suburbia also serve to draw punitive attention to racial minorities in predominately white suburban areas, where they are perceived as outsiders and subject to efforts by law enforcement to police and control racial boundaries. The ideologies that once gave rise to ‘the slave patrol, Slave Codes, Black Codes, Jim Crow and [. . .] sundown towns’, as Boyle (2015, p. 35) asserts, live on in policies and practices of today’s suburbs, where ‘blacks continue to be relegated and segregated to particular places, and [. . .] are differently policed while traveling in and out of those locations’. Consequently, researchers find that racial minorities—especially poor ones—are disproportionately vulnerable to aggressive law enforcement in mostly white suburbs (Beck, 2019).

Third, apart from the punitive attention that racial minorities attract in everyday white settings, visible influxes of racial minority population often trigger efforts to control and police racial boundaries via local politics. In such instances, incumbent residents may experience ‘racial threat’—which is the most common explanation of variation in policing activities and expenditures (Sever, 2003)—and pressure politicians to enact tough-on-crime policies (Blauner, 1972; Bobo and Hutchings, 1996).<sup>2</sup> Hence, monetary punishment may be especially prevalent in white suburbs experiencing nonwhite in-migration—although studies so far have found little support for this explanation (Henricks and Harvey, 2017).

Finally, other studies attend specifically to municipal finance and monetary punishment, but focus more on the decision-making calculus of individual law enforcement officers. Here, researchers examine the circumstances that encourage law enforcement to target citizens for fining, and generally highlight race and revenue considerations. On the one hand, excessive fining occurs more frequently in fiscally strapped municipalities (Makowsky and Stratmann, 2011; Makowsky *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, revenue-motivated law enforcement officers target people they perceive as easy targets, which often means racial minorities and—especially in suburbs that contain commercial districts, commuter routes and transportation hubs—non-residents more generally (Meehan and Ponder, 2002a, 2002b). So racial bias informs the rational choices made by revenue-minded law enforcement to fine specific people.

Taken together, these studies illuminate how suburbia’s ‘fragmented . . . diverse and dispersed pockets of poverty and privilege’ increasingly form the backdrop of racialized punishment (Lung-Amam and Schafran, 2018; see also Boyles, 2015; Soss and Weaver, 2017). But none can account for the puzzling rise of monetary punishment in higher income black suburbs. Below, we develop a new perspective that shows how unequal opportunities for raising revenue lead officials in some suburbs to turn to punitive fines and fees.

## 2.2 The racialization of municipal opportunity

As summarized in Table 1, existing studies reveal how the interplay of race, place and municipal governance shapes punishment via a range mechanisms, including: compounded disadvantage in marginalized suburban communities, boundary control via everyday policing and racial threat politics in predominately white areas, and biased targeting by revenue-minded law enforcement in fiscally strapped municipalities. We will show that these accounts explain many of the Chicago region’s highest-fining communities, but not the

2 Pressures associated with “racial threat” may drive local politics until nonwhite residents attain a threshold sufficient for political influence (Kent and Jacobs 2005).

**Table 1** Conceptual accounts of race, place and punishment

Explanation	Mechanism	Level of analysis	Racial implication	Key citations
Carceral continuum	Compounded disadvantage	System	Racial minority communities suffer numerous disadvantages that expose residents to constant punishment and surveillance	Clear (2007); Shedd (2011); Wacquant (2001, 2009)
Differential policing	Boundary control (via everyday law enforcement)	Community	Racial minorities in white areas are perceived as boundary-transgressing outsiders, and therefore disproportionately attract punitive attention	Beck (2019); Boyle (2015)
Racial threat	Boundary control (via pressure politics)	Community	Racial transition in white areas stokes anxiety among residents, who pressure politicians to enact punitive policies	Blauner (1972); Bobo and Hutchings (1996)
Easy targeting	Rational choice	Individual	Racial biases inform who law enforcement officers target for fining in fiscally-strapped municipalities	Makowsky <i>et al.</i> (2018); Meehan and Ponder (2002b)
Opportunity structures	Municipal Strain	System	Racial legacies shape conditions under which municipalities strive to attain basic mainstream aims of local government	Merton (1968); Oliver and Shapiro (2006); Lipsitz (2011)

middle-class black suburbs that are over-represented among them. Hence, black middle suburbia represents both an empirically and theoretically significant case.

Our findings highlight the role of opportunity structures—especially around revenue generation—and the racialized dynamic of strain between mainstream goals and municipal capacity to attain them. For Merton (1968), this concept draws attention to the often hidden ways that a person's starting point in life structures the seemingly volitional pursuit of wealth accumulation and economic mobility. While people often agree that mainstream ends are most desirable, many lack access to the means necessary to attain them, and are therefore relegated to alternative and less desirable pathways of attainment. Hence, where existing studies focus largely on the racist actions of predominately white residents, politicians and law enforcement officers, we apply the 'opportunity structures' lens to examine how municipalities strive to generate revenue from mainstream sources. Doing so suggests a different account of how the interplay of race and place shapes monetary punishment. Here, we follow Oliver and Shapiro (2006, p. 4), who assert that opportunity structures are racialized in the sense that 'blacks and whites...face different structures of investment

opportunity', which has 'disadvantaged blacks and help to contribute to massive wealth inequalities between the races'.

We show that municipal finance officials in white and nonwhite suburbs strive to achieve common norms of fiscal good governance, but systematically fall short in black suburbia and turn to punitive fines and fees. This process occurs in a shifting policy context in which rollback of federal transfers and a general neoliberal turn in urban policy have made municipalities dependent on own-source revenues and therefore entrepreneurial strategies that attract taxpaying businesses and residents (Harvey, 1989). For reasons that we explain below, Illinois's budget crises have made the state's municipalities especially dependent on commercial taxes assessed on a point of sale basis. As in other American metropolitan regions, we found that these common constraints and opportunities foster a game-like dynamic between finance officials (Pacewicz, 2016a), who share a collective feel for a desirable outcome (fiscal good governance), desirable and undesirable revenues and the economic development strategies that are necessary to achieve both.

Yet, suburbs are not equally equipped to play this game: historical legacies of white uplift and black exclusion situate black suburbs at different economic starting points and geographic positions than their white counterparts, and limit the options available to them. Ours is a story of hyper-segregation, which confers structural advantages on middle-income white suburbs, while racially isolating and undermining opportunity for middle-income black ones. White suburbs are generally located between the city of Chicago and outlying hyper-wealthy white suburbs; this placement provides officials with many opportunities to attract commercial investment and hence the ability to achieve good governance with revenues that fall mostly on nonresidents. In contrast, wealthier black municipalities frequently abut poverty-stricken suburbs, which undermines commercial investment. Compared to officials in white suburbs, officials in black suburbia attract only a fraction of the commercial investment, pay more in economic incentives to attract and retain such commercial investment, and extract more revenues from residents via property taxes. Yet they still face fiscal shortfalls, and their only means of managing crisis is via 'bad' revenues like punitive fines and fees.

### 3. Data and methods

Our aim is to engage in theory building by interrogating a puzzling, surprising, or anomalous phenomenon (Tavory and Timmermans, 2009): the increase of pocketbook policing in black suburbs. The study draws on qualitative interviews with municipal finance officials, review of budgetary documents, reading of news stories in the regional press, and analysis of an administrative dataset of municipal finances in all 276 Chicago-area suburbs located in Illinois.

In 2016 and 2017, we conducted interviews in the Chicago area with 28 municipal officials recruited through a strategy of saturation (Small, 2009). We recruited officials in each type of municipality that the municipal finance literature or informants identify as fiscally distinct. These included affluent north shore suburbs, near north commercial suburbs, white inner-ring suburbs, inner-ring suburbs transitioning from white to Latino or black, black and Latino-majority suburbs in fiscal distress, and high-income minority suburbs. In each case, we reached out to the chief fiscal officer—in affluent suburbs, typically an unelected accounting professional and elsewhere an elected treasurer of variable professional



background—asking a battery of questions focused on municipal finances, including fines and forfeits.

Our interviews with municipal officials were one part of a mini case study of each suburb, and we established internal validity via a strategy of triangulation (Lamont and Swidler, 2014). We read local media reports and checked informants' reports against each suburb's Certified Annual Financial Report (henceforth, CAFR) before, after, and even during interviews as our informants sometimes pulled CAFRs off the shelf when referencing particular trends. CAFRs are book-length budgetary documents, which detail revenues and spending, provide background and justifications for municipal initiatives, and are independently audited. As such, we used interviews to ascertain how officials think about fiscal opportunities and constraints, not to establish facts about municipal fiscal practices, which we could learn from CAFRs.

Based on these interviews, we were surprised to learn of increasing pocketbook policing in black suburbia and additionally that some informants attributed this to fiscal disadvantages in black suburbs that were independent of residents' income. We verified that these trends apply to the entire Chicago region via analysis of an administrative dataset originally compiled by Hendrick (2011), which includes variables tracking suburban demographics, expenditures and revenues, from 1990 to 2011. We extended the dataset to 2016 with data from the census, State Comptroller, effective tax rates compiled by the *Chicago Tribune*, and Cook County Tax Increment Financing reports.

We employ fines and forfeits as a proxy for legal monetary sanctions. The fines and forfeits category, standard in CAFRs, comprises the sum total of revenues collected in the course of civil and criminal prosecution. It includes fines levied in connection with misdemeanor and felony convictions, traffic tickets, parking tickets and fines for violation of municipal ordinances. It also includes fees collected in conjunction with prosecution, like vehicle impound fees, proceeds from the sale of seized goods at police auction, and court fees in suburbs that operate municipal courts (these provide deferred adjudication for misdemeanors like shoplifting or marijuana possession in exchange for community service and a fee).

Our analysis compares black suburbs wherein African Americans comprised a majority with mostly white suburbs, wherein no nonwhite group comprised more than 15% of the population in 2010. Since the income profiles of black and white suburbs are mismatched, we use three categories throughout. Middle-income black and white suburbs fell within the same range of median household income (\$40 000–\$88 000 in 2009). The low-income black suburb category includes all suburbs with a lower median household income than any mostly white suburb. Fiscal trends in mostly white suburbs with median household incomes higher than those of any black suburb were similar to trends in middle income white suburbs, and we excluded high-income white suburbs from the analysis. Inter-suburban fiscal comparisons are problematic, because some suburbs are overwhelmingly commercial or industrial and house few residents, which creates outliers on per capita measures. To address this, we amalgamate all middle-income black, middle-income white and low-income black suburbs into single units, with aggregate revenues as numerator and aggregate population as a denominator. Our analysis therefore offers generalizations about fiscal differences in black and middle-income white suburbia.

Focusing our analysis on fiscal officials and practices does not allow for a comprehensive analysis of pocketbook policing, but is ideally suited for fleshing out the complicated fiscal

calculus that motivates the practice. The decisions that culminate in fines and forfeits revenue happen in multiple sites, some of which we did not seek to observe: politicians may promise tougher law enforcement on the campaign trail or in council chambers, police chiefs or other department heads may pressure municipal employees to issue more fines, or officers themselves may use their street-level discretion. Within this chain of action, our informants are experts tasked with balancing the books and advising other municipal officials on the fiscally necessary and desirable, and we purport to explain only municipal officials' fiscal motives for pocketbook policing, not offer an exhaustive account of all motives. Likewise, our focus on municipal finance officials provides only partial insight into resulting policing practices. As we explain below, officials' directives to raise punitive fine and fee revenue produced a range of outcomes: proactive policing, new municipal ordinances, strict enforcement of existing ordinances, new administrative fees, aggressive collection strategies, installation of traffic cameras or some combination thereof. Our aim is to identify broader conditions that lead municipal officials to call for higher punitive revenues, not offer a systematic account of how these directives ultimately translate into street-level law enforcement strategies.

## 4. Results

We present findings in three sections. Section 1 describes patterns of pocketbook policing in the Chicago region and the rise of pocketbook policing in black suburbs. Section 2 describes the structure of municipal opportunity in suburbia, where unlike in central cities officials strive to extract revenue from nonresidents rather than maximize property values. Section 3 shows how municipal opportunity structures are racialized by showing how officials in white and black suburbs pursue 'good' and 'bad' revenues.

### 4.1 The puzzle: fines and fees in black suburbia

Patterns of monetary punishment in the city of Chicago align with existing theoretical perspectives. Chicago issues more traffic-related fines, per adult, than Los Angeles or New York City, but the ticket debt is concentrated mainly in 'the city's low-income, mostly black neighborhoods', where eight of the ten ZIP codes with the highest accumulated ticket debt per adult are majority black (Sanchez and Kambhampati 2018). This pattern aligns with perspectives that emphasize compounded disadvantage in marginalized communities, where residents are especially vulnerable to police contact and the resulting legal penalties.

The suburbs present a more complicated picture. Most Chicago suburbs do not rely heavily on fines and fees for revenue, and municipal officials report that fines are insufficient to produce a revenue stream worth worrying about. In the words of one official, fines and forfeits are 'nice, but small'.<sup>3</sup> But this general pattern obscures a group of suburbs that are unusually reliant on monetary sanctions for revenue.

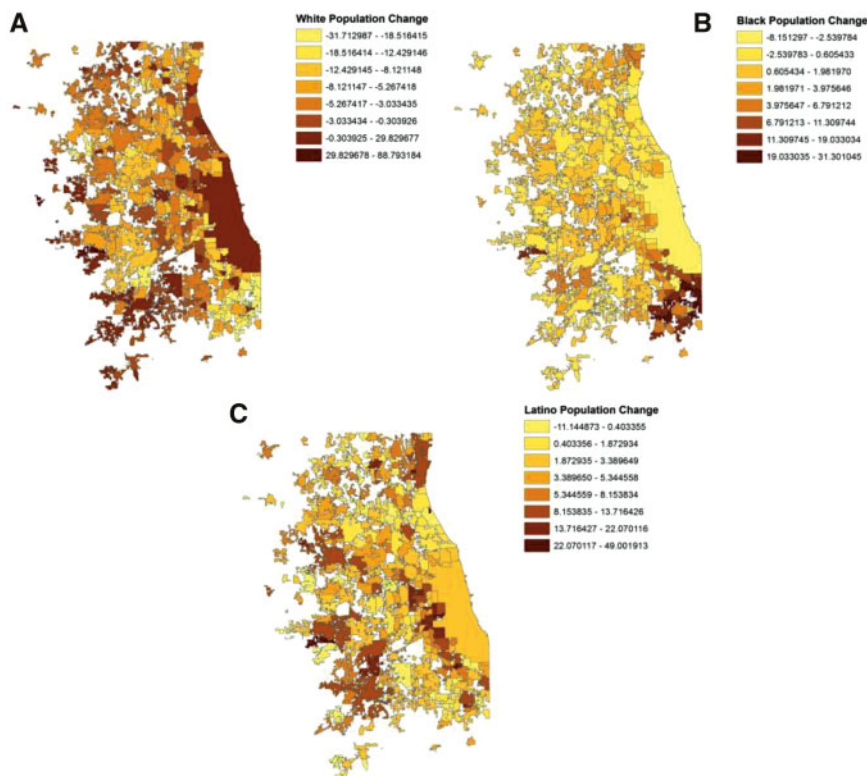
Table 2 shows that some suburbs extracted considerable revenue from fines and forfeits. The Obama administration's Justice Department singled out Ferguson, MO for policing for profit, as the suburb collected \$116 per capita annually in fines and forfeits. In 2016, eleven

3 Administrative data evinces a right-skewed distribution of fines and forfeits, with most suburbs collecting under \$20 per capita.

**Table 2** Highest fines and forfeits in the Chicago REGION, 2014–2016\*

Municipality	F&F per capita.	Demographics	Development Type	Growing nonwhite pop? <sup>a</sup>	
				Black	Latino
1. East Hazel Crest	\$403.94	Black Middle Income	Res, Transport Center	+15.3%	+6.2%
2. Bull Valley	\$384.49	White Upper Income	Res, Commuter Corridor	No	No
3. Lakemoor	\$352.84	White Upper Income	Res, Commuter Corridor	No	+6.1%
4. Rosemont	\$314.47	White Middle Income	Commercial Center	No	+5.4%
5. North Riverside	\$252.30	White Middle Income	Mixed Development	No	+15.7%
6. Hillside	\$252.05	Black Middle Income	Mixed Development	+6.6%	+14.5%
7. Stone Park	\$210.69	Latino Low Income	Residential	No	+9.0%
8. Oak Brook Terrace	\$141.70	White Middle Income	Commercial Center	No +	6.1%
9. Olympia Fields	\$137.08	Black Upper Income	Residential	+18.2%	No
10. Hometown	\$130.12	Latino Middle Income	Residential	+5.5%	+9.7%
11. Forrest Park	\$126.90	Mixed Middle Income	Residential	No	No
12. Harwood Heights	\$115.06	Mixed Middle Income	Mixed Development	No	No
13. McCullom Lake	\$112.31	White Middle Income	Residential	No	No
14. Worth	\$110.52	White Middle Income	Residential	No	+5.4%
15. Bellwood	\$109.06	Black Middle Income	Residential	No	+10.9%
16. Country Club Hls	\$107.60	Black Middle Income	Residential	+5.3%	No
17. Rockdale	\$102.46	White Middle Income	Mixed Development	No	+13.6%
18. Stickney	\$101.00	Latino Middle Income	Residential	No	+29.3%
19. Berwyn	\$99.13	Latino Middle Income	Residential	+5.5%	+21.4%
20. Deer Park	\$98.12	White Upper Income	Commercial Center	No	No

\*Suburbs with fewer than 1000 residents excluded. Growing nonwhite population defined as more than half a percentage change annually, 2000–2010.

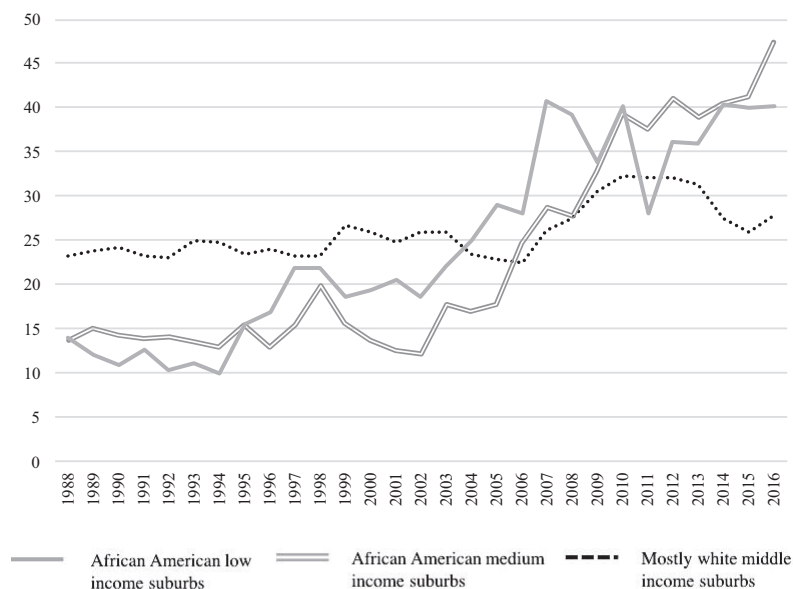


**Figure 1** Demographic change in the Chicago region, 2000–2010. (A) White population change; (B) Black population change; and (C) Latino population change.

Chicago suburbs collected more in fines and forfeits per capita than Ferguson. These suburbs generally collect revenue via a repertoire of plainly entrepreneurial strategies rather than conventional policing, which includes aggressive impounding of vehicles, DUI checkpoints and use of red light cameras in conjunction with altered timing of stoplights.

This subset of high-fining municipalities maps onto the intricate racial geography of suburbia and includes a variety of communities that reflect different explanations of monetary punishment. Some suburbs align with perspectives that highlight easy targeting: they are commercial centers, located along commuter routes, or other kinds of places with easy access to nonresidents.<sup>4</sup> Other high-fining suburbs exemplify the compounded disadvantage more often associated with inner-Chicago neighborhoods—with largely poor and racial

4 Lakemoor and Bull Valley are two such white bedroom communities. Local media reported that Bull Valley police ticketed commercial vehicles along a commuter route in accordance with a little-known law requiring work vehicles to prominently display their company name. Officials also tacked hundreds in administrative fees onto each ticket (Coffee 2015). In Lakemoor, a red light camera at one busy intersection singlehandedly generated \$2 million annually during the mid-2010s.



**Figure 2** Fines and Forfeits per capita, adjusted to 2016 dollars.

minority populations and subject aggressive policing—although none of these make the top-20 list.<sup>5</sup>

Still other suburbs mirror racial threat explanations. [Figure 1A–C](#) illustrate how African Americans have moved largely to segregated pockets in the south and west suburbs, while Latinos have moved especially to the west suburbs while also increasing their overall numbers throughout the region. Where the Latino population has grown rapidly, some suburbs have witnessed public expressions of anti-immigration sentiment that made it into the local media—although this scenario was not unique to high-fining municipalities as Chicago suburbs in general gained an average 5.5% in Latino population during the 2000s. In Latino-majority suburbs like Stone Park and Stickney, the demographic transition occurred quickly and local government remained in the hands of non-Spanish surname politicians in 2016, which may explain their high collection of fines and forfeits.

Notably, however, five of the Chicago region's highest-fining municipalities were black-majority suburbs, and these do not fit easily into existing theoretical accounts. They are largely residential and do not lie along commuter routes (except for East Hazel Crest). Their racial transitions occurred in the distant past and most were already black majority or plurality by 2000 and represented by phenotypically African American politicians. While some of these suburbs saw a percentage increase in black population in recent decades, these upticks owe mainly to the outmigration of white residents.

Most importantly for this article, monetary punishment was most pronounced in relatively affluent black areas. As [Figure 2](#) shows, the black suburbs listed and highlighted in

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Phoenix, a low-income suburb that has been over 90% black since the 1990, collected \$67 per capita in fines and forfeits, placing it in the top 15% of all Chicago area municipalities.

Table 2 are indicative of a general trend: whereas black majority suburbs were historically the lowest fining of Chicago area suburbs, they increased collection of fines and forfeits revenue after 2007, when area municipalities of all kinds were subject to fiscal distress (and, as we will show, black-majority suburbs disproportionately so). However, wealthier black suburbs drove this trend—including some of the region's most affluent black communities like Country Club Hills and even Olympia Fields, which have among the highest median household income and home ownership rate of any African American community in the USA.

Moreover, officials in higher income black suburbs reported the kind of fiscal distress that one typically associates with much poorer communities. And unlike officials in mostly white suburbs—who generally did not admit to pocketbook policing—officials in minority suburbs were generally open about looking to fines and forfeits as a fiscal stopgap, which they described as one among many bad options. ‘We got to a point that was like, “There’s nowhere left to cut, so we have to go to the revenue side”’, an official told us. ‘That’s when we looked at our fee and fine structure’. To explain this surprising pattern, we elucidate, first, the structure of municipal opportunity in the Chicago region, before analyzing how municipal decision-making contexts vary between black- and white-majority suburbs.

#### 4.2 Other people’s money: growth politics in suburbia

In the Chicago region, officials in white and nonwhite suburbs shared views about optimal ways of generating revenue and achieving self-reliance. They saw it as given that municipalities achieve fiscal sustainability by outcompeting other suburbs for the right type of development. And officials were especially desirous of developments that generate politically invisible revenues that do not rile residents. Following Merton (1968), these goals were mainstream in the sense that municipal officials universally took their desirability for granted. These shared ideals belie a common political economic context, which makes it difficult for most suburban municipalities to maintain balanced budgets with traditional revenues like intergovernmental transfers and property taxes alone. This state of affairs results from two historical trends, which are especially pronounced in the Chicago region: the segregation of economic and especially racial groups into different municipalities and the increasing fiscal independence—and therefore precarity—of these autonomous political units. These trends together fuel competition between suburbs over particular kinds of revenue.

The dominant thrust of 20th century American urbanism was the ghettoization of large American cities, and the corresponding expansion of white suburbia via federal subsidies, discriminatory credit policies and exclusionary zoning (Massey and Denton, 1993). The recent suburbanization of poverty and growing racial and economic diversity and segregation within suburbia softened the contrast between center cities and suburbs, such that most poor and many nonwhite residents now live in suburbs outside the city of Chicago. Hence, in the suburbs, the race and class boundaries that segregate places and communities are increasingly coterminous with the political and fiscal boundaries that demarcate local government. This means that most suburban communities are empowered to elect their own leaders, who have the authority to make revenue and policing decisions—including in black suburbs, which are generally represented by African-American politicians.

In recent decades, municipal leaders’ nominal independence has gone hand-in-hand with mounting fiscal challenges. Suburban expansion historically marked an explicit rejection by whites of resource pooling with racial minorities—suburbs were to be politically self-governing and fiscally dependent on self-generated revenue like the property tax—thus

contributing to a distinctly American pattern of political fragmentation (Logan, 1976). But during the mid-20th Century, policy-makers in both parties generally supported federal–local revenue sharing programs, many of which disproportionately aided poor and hence minority municipalities (logan and schneider 1981; Mollenkopf, 1983). In the 1980s, policymakers in both parties embraced a neoliberal consensus that held up market-like competition as a model of good governance, which led to the virtual elimination of federal transfers to municipalities. Concurrently, a wave of statewide property tax revolts produced laws that limit the ability of municipal leaders to increase the property tax levy (Martin, 2008). As this left many municipalities with fiscal shortfalls, policy makers in many states allowed municipal officials to collect new revenues to make up the difference (Schafran, 2013)—for instance, real estate transaction taxes, various user fees and point of sale commercial taxes.

The Chicago region is an extreme exemplar of these general trends. Illinois has been in budget crisis for much of the 2000s and 2010s, and the state has delayed or scaled back transfers to municipalities. Suburbs in the counties that surround Chicago are likewise subject to stringent property tax limitations, which apply to municipalities with fewer than 25 000 residents unless they are nullified by referendum—limitations that apply to 69% of the region’s suburbs (Hendrick, 2011). And Illinois policy-makers have expanded municipal revenue-raising powers to allow municipalities to make up for revenue shortfalls. Chicago area suburbs can levy additional sales and fuel taxes on purchases within city limits, monetize water, sewer and other municipal services, assess various real estate taxes and user fees, license and tax video gaming machines and more. These entrepreneurial powers extend to fines and fees: Illinois suburbs can install red light cameras, impound vehicles, retain a larger portion of fines for civil and criminal infractions within city limits, and garnish the state tax returns of residents who do not pay fines.

The predictable result, in the Chicago region and elsewhere, has been wide and growing variation in the fiscal condition of suburbs. On the one hand, some of Chicago’s north shore suburbs boast median household incomes over \$250 000, pay municipal employees six-figure salaries that rival or exceed those of Chicago, fund public works with cash rather than debt-financing, and maintain futuristic town halls that appear plucked from Silicon Valley. Conversely, Chicago’s mostly black south side suburbs include some of the poorest municipalities in the USA, which lurch from one fiscal crisis to another, offer few municipal services, and hire police officers and other employees at near-minimum wage and on a part time basis—a situation that regularly produces police bribery and corruption scandals.

In this context, municipal finance officials turn to entrepreneurial strategies focused on commercial investment, because only these provide them with an opportunity to balance revenues and expenses with minimal political backlash.

On the one hand, municipal finance officials serve at the pleasure of elected leadership, but the business of government requires them to perform the often unpopular work of extracting money from voters. Officials perceive residents as desiring excellent services without visibly having to pay for them, and see avoiding unpopular taxes and fees as part of their job description. And they also believe that tax hikes may trigger a downward spiral of insolvency akin to the calamitous condition of certain Chicago area black communities, where residents and businesses leave for elsewhere and force officials to raise taxes on those who remain to maintain the tax levy.

But, on the other hand, officials face simultaneous pressure to raise new revenues. As the costs of government outpace traditional revenues, officials become increasingly subject to discipline from credit rating agencies, whose ratings determine the cost of borrowing for

capital projects (Sinclair, 2014). Although agencies' rating methodology is proprietary, their auditors meet regularly with municipal officials, who report that—since Illinois's budget crisis—auditors have become especially concerned about capital reserves and new sources of revenue. 'They like to see a huge rainy-day fund', one director told us, 'solid revenue streams and new revenue streams'. Officials therefore equated their goals with a professional ethos of 'good governance': that is, with raising adequate revenue without provoking capital flight or repelling the sorts of would-be residents who pay taxes. And, in Illinois, state law gives municipal officials opportunities to achieve this via strategies that maximize sales and other consumption taxes.

In this context, officials across the Chicago region pursued revenues in accordance with a strategy that one described as, 'other people's money': they preferred revenues and developments that require less services and extract money primarily from *non-residents* and tried to avoid those that visibly extract from residents. The following, from an official in a white suburb with extensive commercial development, summarizes this strategy:

So my philosophy; OPM, other people's money. Residents vote. . . People who are staying in your hotel rooms don't vote, here. If they lived here, they wouldn't need a hotel room. So I would look to maximize my advantage. While you're here, have a cheese burger; have an expensive cheese burger, have a beer or three, it's okay. You're not driving. [The] people who don't live here, they're paying for the quality of life and the services that we got.

Consistent with this report, municipal officials employed a common scale of 'good' to 'bad' revenues—and, consistent with prior studies—choose from among possible economic development strategies by picking those that maximize more-desirable revenues (Pacewicz, 2016b). Municipal officials ranked sales and other commercial transaction taxes as most desirable, followed by fees on nonresidents, and finally property taxes and visible fines and fees borne entirely by residents—for instance, the much-hated vehicle registration sticker.

This desire to collect more sales taxes was universal among officials across the region. 'With sales taxes, you can export it', said an official in an affluent North Shore suburb. 'The people coming [here] are not paying property taxes, not paying water bills. . . that's a mechanism for nonresidents to share a portion of the expenses'. An official in a struggling minority community agreed. 'I'd like to see sales tax go up, for sure. . . Because I hate to tap into our existing residents'.

Consistent with this attitude, we found municipal officials fixated on attracting the sorts of commercial developments that generate sales taxes. This stands in contrast to growth politics in central cities, where accounts generally present officials as focused on stimulating gentrification or planning the sorts of megaprojects that raise property values and create a windfall of property taxes and rents. But in suburbs, officials stand to gain more from developments like big box stores, car dealers, or office parks, which they reported can singlehandedly generate between \$600 000 and \$1 million annually in sales taxes—perhaps 10–20% of a small suburb's general fund.<sup>6</sup> In the suburbs, economic development plans focused

6 This was widely reported, but is difficult to verify as national retailers treat location financials as proprietary. Officials sometimes placed other taxes and fees on par with sales taxes, but according to a logic consistent with the philosophy of other people's money. For example, they valued revenue from building permits in suburbs with new construction or motor fuel tax in suburbs with many gas stations.



particularly on efforts to create, in local parlance, a ‘money-maker’ or ‘revenue generator’ that included several commercial developments. For example,

White-majority commercial suburb: [We have] a road running throughout. . . And [our community] looks at that road as a revenue generator. . . you see all types of businesses, car dealers. . . it cuts right in between high rent and middle rent so you’re right in the middle of people who have money to spend on cars. . . And we have definitely done some work to incent the car dealers as well.

Conversely, municipal officials viewed property taxes as both undesirable and insufficient for fiscal solvency. This belief reflects the politicization of property taxes via ongoing ‘tax revolts’ since the 1970s (Martin, 2008), which led to the proliferation of state-imposed property tax limitations—including in Illinois—that forbid officials from raising taxes more than a fraction of the previous year’s tax levy. In light of such tax limitations, officials argued that residential developments are a net fiscal loss for the city, because property taxes usually do not cover the cost of new services (see Schafran, 2013). ‘Housing is your worst, especially big scale housing without a lot of architectural amenities’, an official in a middle-income white suburb reported. ‘[Even] the large square footage four-bedroom home is probably not paying to sustain itself if there’s kids in that house’. And consistent with the spirit of the tax revolt, officials additionally saw property taxes as a political minefield, best navigated with caution or avoided altogether. ‘[Our residents, ] their property tax was up a hundred dollars and they lose their mind’, an official said, ‘but sales tax goes from 7-10% and costs them \$600 and they could care less’.

### 4.3 Racialized municipal opportunity structures

While municipal officials held common views about desirable revenues, only some municipalities were able to pursue strategies that could optimize them—notably mostly white suburbs as opposed to black ones. Merton (1968) argued that only privileged actors have the resources to achieve mainstream goals via mainstream means—an outcome he referred to as ‘conformity’. Thus, one can view officials in some suburbs as fiscal conformists: they use mainstream means to successfully pursue mainstream ends, a privilege rooted in high property values and easy access to revenues derived from nonresidents—circumstances that usually occur and are experienced as normal in white municipalities. Conversely, officials in black-majority suburbs had few opportunities to collect ‘good’ revenues and expended more economic development dollars in often wasted efforts to attract such opportunities. Black suburbs also collected more ‘bad’ revenues on *both* a per capita basis and in absolute terms vis-à-vis white suburbs—notably property taxes and fines and forfeits.

Relative to middle-income white suburbs, black-majority suburbs enjoyed little access to sales and other point of sales taxes. Commercial investors use area demographics to make location decisions, and middle-income white suburbs benefited from the ‘neighborhood of the neighborhood’ in which they are situated (Sampson, 2012). Many are located between Chicago’s wealthy north side and the hyper-wealthy suburbs of the North Shore, which make them ideal sites of investment for shopping malls, big box stores, car dealerships, hotels and office parks, which profit from moderate rents and proximity to rich and educated demographics.

Conversely, higher income black suburbs are segregated into racially and economically isolated zones where low income black suburbs pull down area income. As in central cities,

affluent black neighborhoods suffered from the low income and disinvestment of their neighbors (Pattillo, 1999; Sharkey, 2014). For reasons that we explain below, black suburbs also relied heavily on excessively high property taxes and therefore had higher effective tax rates than comparable white suburbs—another repellent to commercial investment. Officials in black suburbs were aware of these disadvantages and some additionally suspected outright racial discrimination on the part of commercial businesses. ‘There’s a feeling among area leaders that we’ve been red lined a little bit’, an official in a middle-income black suburb explained. ‘We’re constantly promoting and advertising our population and even our income level [to retailers.] And still we have difficulty attracting’.

Figure 3 shows that officials in black suburbs correctly assessed their structural disadvantage vis-à-vis middle income white suburbs: middle-income black suburbs collected \$117 per capita in sales taxes on average and just 18 cents in sales taxes for every dollar of property taxes as compared to \$345 per capita and 86 cents in sales taxes for every dollar of property taxes in middle income white suburbs. Low-income black suburbs collected slightly more than middle-income black suburbs, though far less than white suburbs. We observed a similar pattern with smaller point of sales taxes like motor fuel, hotel, and entertainment taxes.

Moreover, black officials expended greater resources to attract desirable investment. Across the Chicago region, officials created economic incentive packages to entice commercial businesses, but officials in black suburbs did so disproportionately. In white suburbs, municipal officials often reported issuing tax abatements and other incentives—which they viewed as costly and risky—on a case by case basis, and some suburbs refused any incentives at all. In contrast, the common view among officials in black suburbs was that a 50% sales tax abatements is standard for commercial businesses like a big box store—that is, such businesses should get half of the sales taxes that a municipality collects from their sales, typically in addition to property tax abatements and other incentives.

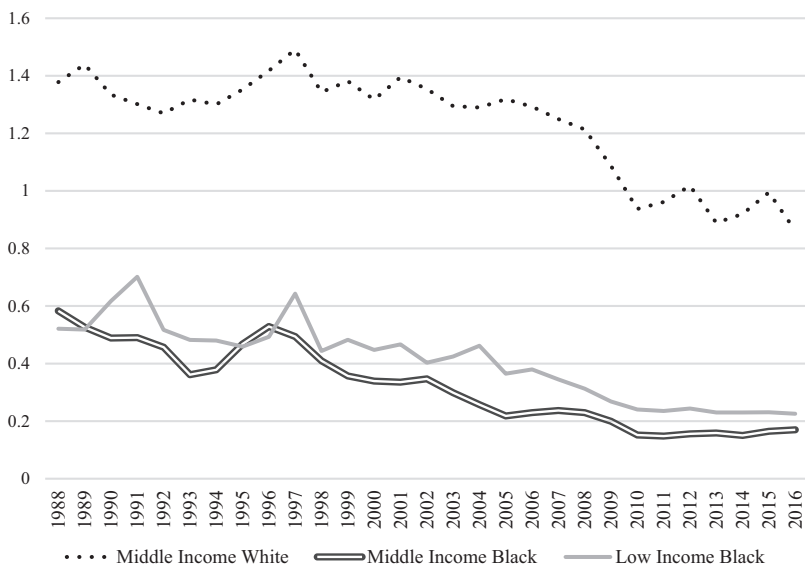


Figure 3 Ratio of sales tax to property tax receipts in Chicago area suburbs.

One example of costly economic incentive packages involves Tax Increment Financing (TIF). This commonly used tool creates a discretionary revenue stream by allowing officials to establish priority over tax receipts that would ordinarily go to other local taxing bodies. Officials are formally entitled only to tax revenues that result from public sector-initiated growth, but TIF lends itself to creative accounting mechanisms that make it many municipalities' preferred tool for funding economic incentives or infrastructure improvements that encourage private sector investment, especially in places without other discretionary development dollars (Pacewicz, 2016b). Low-income black suburbs have used TIF heavily since the practice became widely available in the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Middle-income black suburbs generally tracked patterns of TIF revenues in white middle-income suburbs, until after the 2007/8 recession, when officials in black suburbs reported fiscal distress, and patterns of TIF revenues between low- and middle-income black suburbs began to converge.

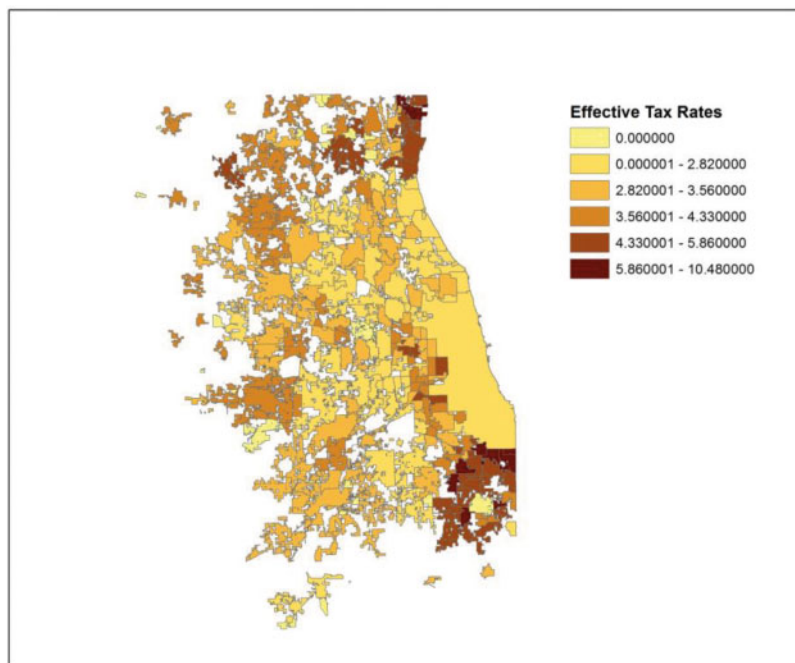
We additionally encountered numerous cases wherein black suburbs' TIF-funded efforts to attract commercial investment went awry and forced additional expenditures. TIF carries the risk of additional costs, because municipalities commonly back revenue bonds with projections of increased tax revenue from a development project. One middle income black suburb attempted a TIF-financed redevelopment of a commercial district, which actually saw a two-fold decline in property values as stores moved to new shopping centers in growing white suburbs at the metropolitan periphery. To the chagrin of municipal officials, the TIF district therefore generated no increment with which to repay the TIF-backed bond. This event dominated the next decade of local politics and officials tried various schemes, most funded with general revenue dollars, to raise property values in the TIF district. The suburb even purchased a shopping center, took over as landlord and began making improvements. 'We replaced all the windows. . . all the buildings have been reroofed', an official explained. 'We've. . . demolished buildings. We've built a road down the center. . . and a smaller road so that smaller stores had exposure'.

In sum, municipalities in general increasingly self-finance development strategies to attract desirable revenues, but racial segregation undercuts the ability of black suburbs to do so effectively, thus making such entrepreneurial efforts costlier and less likely to succeed. This racialization of municipal opportunities additionally made black suburbs overly reliant on 'bad' revenues—notably property taxes and fines and forfeits.

Black majority municipalities imposed a heavier property tax burden on their residents than comparable white suburbs. This finding contradicts standard narratives of racial disparities in fiscal distress, which hold that as African Americans move into an area, white homeowners leave, property values decline, and property tax receipts—which are based on the value of property—also fall (Smith *et al.*, 2001). In the Chicago area, the first two parts of this causal chain occur, but not the third. Understanding why requires specific attention to political and fiscal mechanisms. As is common in American states, Illinois's property tax limitation law limits *increases* in the annual overall amount of tax collected (i.e., the tax *levy*), which caters to a scenario that more often applies to white municipalities: steadily rising property values. It fails to protect property owners from tax levy increases in places where property values are declining, like many black-majority suburbs, and actually incentivizes officials to *raise tax rates* in those circumstances.

While officials view property taxes as generally undesirable, they also consider it irresponsible to forgo the moderate, annual tax levy increases allowed by law. This is because

7 Figures showing TIF revenues are available upon request.

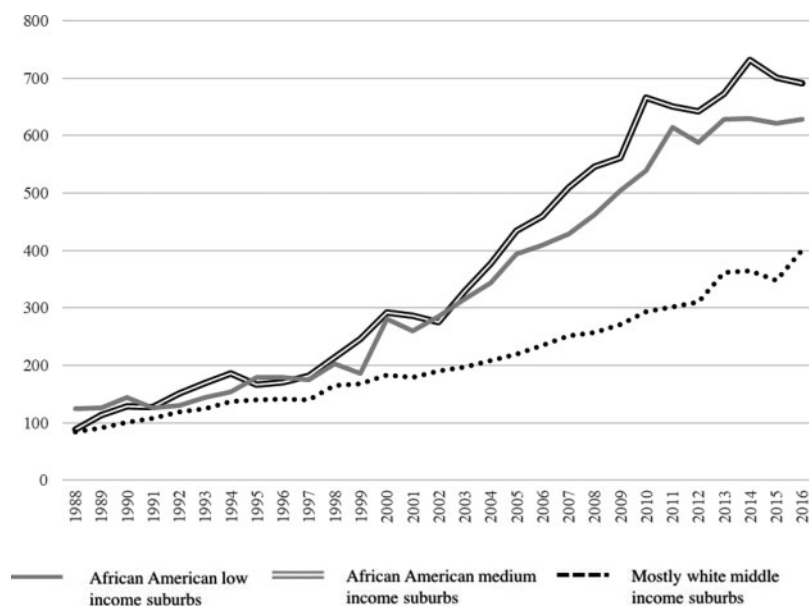


**Figure 4** Effective tax rates in the Chicago region.

officials view the property tax levy as ‘recession proof’ revenue—other revenues dry up during recessions, but officials can maintain the same property tax levy by raising tax rates. Consistent with this view, officials in white suburbs moderately increased their levies on an annual basis, though some suburbs then remitted unneeded taxes to residents as abatements—usually with much publicity and fanfare (Hendrick, 2011).

Hence, the mainstream aim of a stable property tax levy affects homeowners in black and white suburbs in much different ways. In white suburbs, property values generally rise faster than the inflation rate and annual growth of the tax levy necessarily entails decreases in the average tax rate. But in black suburbs with declining property values, a slight annual increase in the levy means dramatically higher property tax rates. As evidenced by Figure 4, the latter scenario has played out in Chicago area municipalities, wherein effective tax rates in black suburbs range from 3.8% to a staggering 10.4%. Fifteen of the twenty suburbs with the highest effective tax rates are black-majority suburbs, and the median effective tax rate in black suburbs is 5.67%, compared to 3.3% in mostly white suburbs.

Figure 5 shows that residents of black suburbs not only pay higher tax rates, but also dramatically higher property taxes both on a per capita, as compared to counterparts in middle income white suburbs. Consistent with typical white flight narratives, the population of white suburbs increased since the 1990s, while the population of middle-income black suburbs stagnated and that of low-income black suburbs decreased. Since officials across the board adhered to moderate tax levy increases, however, per capita property tax receipts increased in black- vis-à-vis white-majority suburbs.



**Figure 5** Property tax receipts per capita, adjusted to 2016 dollars.

For example, in 1988, residents in white middle-income suburbs paid \$175 in property taxes on average while those in comparable black-majority suburbs paid \$184 (in 2016 dollars).<sup>8</sup> By 2016, the former paid \$400 in property taxes per capita while the latter paid \$690 per capita. Likewise, we calculated that the ratio of the overall property tax levy in black to white suburbs actually increased since the 1980s, and was roughly 1.35 times as high for middle-income black versus white suburbs in 2016 as compared to 1988. This means that black middle-income suburbs actually collected more in total property taxes vis-à-vis comparable white suburbs, even though white suburbs grew in population relative to black suburbs during this period (in low-income black suburbs the ratio fell below 1). In other words, declining property values in black middle-income suburbs ironically meant that suburban officials disproportionately squeezed middle-income black suburbanites for property tax revenue.

In sum, officials in white- and black-majority suburbs followed similar aims and expectations, but the racialization of municipal opportunity structures meant that they ultimately took different paths with respect to generating revenue. White suburbs generally had access to ‘other people’s money’—the most desirable revenues—such that they raised sufficient revenue before having to dip down into less-desirable revenues. By the time they got to property taxes, for example, officials in many white suburbs had already funded municipal functions in accordance with the ideal of good governance, and simply abated taxes to residents. By contrast, officials in black suburbs had little access to desirable revenues, and focused their

<sup>8</sup> This section focuses exclusively on the municipal portion of the property tax levy. Because property taxes fund other taxing bodies like school districts and counties, residents total per capita tax burden is higher.

revenue raising efforts at the less-desirable end of the scale—on property taxes. And yet, even this undesirable path towards fiscal solvency was often insufficient in black suburbs, where officials reported operating at the knife’s edge of insolvency—or past it. Many black suburbs were heavily indebted, and officials reported that debt payments ate up unexpected new revenues, which is consistent with administrative data that shows spikes in debt payments during periods of economic expansion.<sup>9</sup> Low-income black suburbs in the Chicago region can be described only as failed local states: unable to provide basic public services and overwhelmed by foreclosures. But even in higher income black suburbs, officials reported that they are in fiscal distress and regularly forced to make painful budget cuts. For example:

[In a lot of adjacent communities] the expenditures far outweigh the reality of the cash flows and the revenue that they receive... if its not a team effort, if everybody does not see the pain of the bleeding of what’s happening in the municipality... its hard to make the deep core changes that are needed.

When I took over... we were running a deficit... we’re now surplusing. So there’s been a lot of change—a lot of hard work... We essentially eliminated two departments. There were a lot of salary changes, so with supervisors and managers we... created new titles and attached set salaries probably significantly lower than what they were making... we took a lot of full-time, moved them to part-time, or eliminated positions.

In this context of painful cuts and choices, officials in black suburbs looked to pocketbook policing. Like most of their counterparts in white suburbs, they spoke about fines and forfeits as ‘bad revenues’. The only exceptions we found to this attitude were officials in mostly white commercial and commuter suburbs. Though they did not cop to pocketbook policing outright, they dismissed the significance of excessive fining by pointing out that it fell disproportionately on nonresident commuters or shoppers (i.e. ‘other people’s money’). In contrast, officials in black suburbia approached fines and forfeits as a bad option, but also as one possibility from a menu of entirely bad options.

Officials in black suburbs engaged in three pocketbook policing strategies that, unlike in high-fining white suburbs, focused mostly on residents. The first consisted of pressuring police officers and other officials to do more. ‘[We had a] meeting with all the police officers and said, ‘This is what we’re going. We’re enforcing all of these now. We’re not slacking off and not enforcing things’ one official explained. ‘And we got our housing inspectors out there to start fining and warning people’. In other minority suburbs, officials augmented the police by employing community service officers—typically, retired police officers who receive a modest hourly wage in exchange for writing parking tickets and issuing other minor fines. Elsewhere, officials looked for new ways to fine residents. In one suburb, officials faced a fiscal shortfall and showed us an internal memo that listed five policy options, which were ordered by how undesirable they would be for residents and local politicians (nevertheless, the suburb enacted all five). Two items on the list included new vehicle impound fees and a red light camera. The finance director explained:

The police went into impounding. I think it is \$500 per car if somebody is pulled over and they have outstanding issues. Usually it is for expired license, I think. [And] the state does allow

9 Figure not reported here, but available upon request.

communities to get in line and capture the income tax returns of anybody who has outstanding fines and fees out there. [Then we're] first in line.

Consistent with our argument, such fine-maximization strategies were especially pervasive in wealthier black suburbs. Shut out of municipal opportunity, black suburbs across the board experienced massive capital flight and high effective tax rates were widespread. But the wealthier ones were not yet past the point of fiscal no return, and could still count on responsive housing inspectors and municipal administrators. In such places, officials saw fines as undesirable, but still preferable to fiscal collapse.

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

Municipal decisions about revenue and policing have outsized consequences (Harris *et al.*, 2010; US Department of Justice, 2015), and this article has answered the call to open the black box of municipal government to identify conditions that promote pocketbook policing. While the literature posits three plausible explanations that help to explain some of the Chicago region's highest fining municipalities, we focus our analysis on the surprising case of rising punitive revenue in Chicago's higher income black suburbs. These high-fining municipalities defy existing explanations because high-income black suburbs offer police no particular opportunities to target nonresidents, their residents are not experiencing racial threat, and they lack the high poverty and crime rates found in the most marginalized communities—but they nevertheless experience problems that have no parallel in middle-income white suburbs.

To explain this, we build on the existing literature to develop a new theory highlighting the *racialization of municipal opportunity*. This theoretical lens emphasizes the reproduction of racial disparities in the municipal capacity to generate desirable revenue and fulfill mainstream aims of local government (Merton, 1968; Oliver and Shapiro, 2006) within the distinctive regime of growth politics that defines suburbia (Logan and Molotch, 1987). Highlighting the intersection of historical legacies and contemporary policies, we show how racism is baked into seemingly 'colorblind' processes of municipal governance. Consequently, white suburbs reap generous structural advantages while racially and economically isolated black middle-income municipalities struggle to make ends meet. Consistent with perspectives that emphasize the interplay of race and space in shaping opportunities (Lipsitz, 2011), our findings reveal how racial segregation is interwoven with fiscal entrepreneurialism to produce a distinctly racialized pattern of place-based stratification. White suburbs easily attract the sorts of commercial businesses, business parks and hotels that create windfalls of sales and other commercial taxes, whereas black suburbs are deprived of desirable revenues, lose more on costly incentive packages and debt products, and rely on undesirable revenues like property taxes and monetary sanctions. The power of race in shaping municipal opportunity is revealed both in the contrast between black- and white-majority municipalities in general, and the equally gaping void between middle-income black and white suburbs in particular.

These findings advance broader understandings of the racial politics of law enforcement, economic mobility and municipal governance, both in an American and comparative context. First, our findings add to the growing literature on monetary punishment by showing

how it is driven by municipal decision-making—particularly as officials grapple with a new mix of racial segregation, political fragmentation and new entrepreneurial pressures. Pocketbook policing is both a product and cause of political disenfranchisement in communities of color (Epp *et al.*, 2014), which observers usually equate with a lack of representation in municipal government. We illustrate a parallel disenfranchisement that is woven into the fabric of state and nation-wide municipal governance and operates even when municipal politicians and officials are racial minorities.

Second, this article contributes to research on race and economic mobility. People widely imagine a home in the suburbs as a manifestation of the ‘American dream’, which allows suburbanites to achieve upward mobility by paying less taxes and enjoying better services than those available in central cities. While this narrative may accurately describe a large swath of white suburbia, our findings add to the chorus of studies that suggest that the suburbs where middle class blacks are most likely to move impose unique constraints on racial minorities (Patillo, 1999; Sampson, 2012; Sharkey, 2014). Instead, for many black residents, the suburbs impose fiscal burdens that extract a disproportionate share of their household wealth, render them vulnerable to criminal justice involvement, and therefore undercut economic mobility, in part via the issuance of punitive fines.

Third, our findings advance scholarship on the intersection between race and fiscal inequality (see O’Brien, 2017; Martin and Beck, 2017). They illuminate how the consequences of fiscal entrepreneurialism, which generally leads cities to engage in costly place-marketing strategies that produce fiscal problems and hollow out democratic institutions (see e.g. Harvey, 1989; Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Pacewicz, 2016b), vary along racial lines. Black middle-income suburbs are especially susceptible to these problems because their officials pursue the mainstream ideal of providing for residents through almost entirely self-sufficient means. Yet, due to structural disadvantages that systematically channel desirable revenue to white suburbia, black suburban officials find themselves perpetually managing fiscal crisis and confronting the demoralizing limits of their capacity as providers. Many of them sense that black suburbs are especially vulnerable to the kind of problems they face, but still ultimately assume personal responsibility for getting their communities out of the red via their own entrepreneurial wizardry and technical financial expertise. This mentality absolves a political-economic system that favors white suburbs and ironically leads black suburbs down the path of monetary punishment.

While racism is baked invisibly into the mechanism of municipal revenue generation, the consequences that flow from policies that encourage municipalities to compete for revenue are indistinguishable in practice from the most open and explicit forms of racial discrimination. At one extreme, Chicago’s poorest predominately black suburbs, offer no community programs; charge fees for basic services like garbage collection and vehicle registration; hire police officers and other key officials only on a part time basis; and routinely fail to file annual financial reports (Ryan *et al.*, 2014). Such untoward fiscal conditions extend across black suburbia, including higher income black suburbia, where officials inhibit the upward mobility of higher income residents by extracting revenue with disproportionately high taxes and even expropriate wealth through aggressive use of punitive fines and fees.

At the other extreme, some white suburbs offer extensive health and recreational services; maintain princely municipal buildings; plan for the future with the assistance of top-notch financial professionals, consultants, and expensive accounting software that automatically tracks municipal spending; and pay law enforcement salaries rivaling those of Chicago.



According to local press, tiny Itasca, a middle-income white suburb with a population of 8649, generates so much in hotel and motel taxes that it struggles to find ways of spending all the money it makes and consistently holds Illinois' second largest fireworks display. In white suburbia, tax revenues are literally going up in smoke when other municipalities in the region cannot afford to maintain a single full-time police officer on staff.

Our article shows that this state of affairs occurs due to an intersection of historical racial legacies and the unique political-economy of the USA, which translates historical racial legacies into fiscal advantage for white suburbs. It is hard to imagine an analogous system that benefited racial minorities rather than white suburbanites remaining politically invisible, deeply entrenched, and persisting for long, particularly when the policy solutions are so readily apparent: history shows that inter-governmental revenue sharing reduces inter-municipal inequities (Schneider and Logan, 1981) as would simply pooling municipal sales tax receipts and redistributing them regionally on a per capita basis.

Finally, and along these lines, our findings suggest that scholars of urban political economy should pay greater attention to the distributional politics of municipal finance regimes. Scholars have long analyzed municipal politics as constitutive of bigger political economies and have focused especially on how capital's power influences people's pocketbooks, social and political subjectivity and lived experience of the city. Contemporary urban politics, they argue, effects a transfer of resources from citizens to corporations, produces periodic crises, and sidesteps democratic bodies at the grassroots. Our analysis of the Chicago region is consistent with this view, but also shows that the costs and benefits of entrepreneurial and neo-liberal urban governance are unevenly distributed by race—in fact, it is no exaggeration to say that this mode of governance transfers resources not just from people to corporations but also from black to white suburbanites. Though our analysis of the Chicago area is contingent on various aspects of the American political context, it is plausible that similar types of wealth transfer occur in other national contexts, albeit via different mechanisms. In sum, the category of winners from entrepreneurial and urban governance is potentially much larger than just those with a direct interest in land values. Complete accounts of national political economies need to go into the weeds and examine how subnational fiscal regimes create constituencies with a vested interest in the status quo.

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