



“Hobocops”: Undercover Policing’s Deceptive Encounters

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ABSTRACT

Policing cultures have reflected a conservative mindedness, particularly when directed toward street-involved, unhoused persons. Yet alongside an increase in urban poverty across Canada, public police today have taken up a puzzling, disturbing affinity with the identity of homelessness. We explore public police use of an undercover technique called “hobocops”. As part of these operations, public police disguise themselves as homeless people holding cardboard signs at busy motor traffic intersections as a way of regulating distracted driving. We explore these practices as encounters between the increasingly everyday activities of covert policing, urban governance, and a sociological account of police engaging in identity co-optation. Detailing how hobocop operations have unfolded in Canada, we contribute to the literature on covert policing by focusing on the operatives of these deceptive encounters rather than the targets. Drawing on the results of freedom of information requests and media reporting, we suggest that hobocop operations are undertaken in part because of police officer enjoyment of enacting the hobo identity. Applying literature on deception in policing and on the degradation of homeless persons, we reflect on the implications of these deceptive encounters for public policing and literature on criminal justice practices.

KEYWORDS

police investigations, deception, homelessness, cities, distracted driving

1 Introduction

Contemporary capitalism has extended the logics of exclusion and impoverishment to larger scales (Sassen, 2014), overlapping with systems of criminal justice aimed at controlling the growing underclass (Feeley & Simon, 1992; Rose, 2000). Part of the management of these excluded populations is a culture of vindictiveness and punitiveness toward the racialized, stigmatized, and homeless urban poor. Today, homelessness is commonly visible in Canadian cities (O’Grady, Gaetz, & Buccieri, 2013), though it is a scandal that homelessness shocks hardly anyone at all. The lack of affordable housing, declining wages, as well as reduced social welfare benefits and social assistance have all contributed to the increased presence of homeless persons on street corners, sidewalks, meridians, and in other city spaces (Gaetz, Gulliver, & Richter, 2014). Usually encountered with suspicion, less often with sympathy, the homeless person is perceived as “a threat that appears from elsewhere” (Kawash, 1998, p. 320–321), yet homelessness is a deeply urban condition produced by socio-economic patterns of exclusion and segregation. Public police have many encounters with homeless persons.

Existing literature has examined the monitoring, arrest, and abuse of homeless persons in multiple countries (Amster, 2003; Eick, 2003; Mosher, 2002; Sylvestre, 2010; Von Mahs, 2005). Public police can also be seen to prey on the homeless person in a new and different way that we explore below.

A number of Canadian municipal policing agencies have recently used what have come to be described as “hobocops”.¹ As part of these undercover operations, police officers disguise themselves as homeless men holding signs at busy motor traffic intersections. Instead of solicitations for money, the cardboard signs carried by the officers inform drivers that texting is illegal. Some variations of the hobocops tactic have been aimed at enforcing seat belt usage. At least a dozen Canadian cities have used “hobocops” for cracking down on texting or minor regulatory issues in the past five years. Despite reproducing the notion that homeless persons eke out marginal lives not worth public attention (Fiske, 1999), in cases where the public has raised criticisms about the tactic, the police have responded by claiming that it is an effective tool against rogue texting, and that they mean no ill intent against homeless people.

In this article, we explore the encounter between poverty and policing, demonstrating how police undercover work, poverty, and identities intersect within hobocops tactics. Sociologies of deception have investigated why individuals or groups with power try to emulate, take up, or dress up as members of oppressed or marginalized communities, or otherwise try to deceive others as a way of enforcing order (see Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015; Gibson, 2014; Meltzer, 2003). A common mantra when people of privilege dress like Indigenous peoples, wear blackface, or pretend to be homeless is that the gestures are harmless. For public police, not only is their voyeuristic costuming as poor people harmless; it is undertaken in the name of public safety. Though policing agencies have characterized the operations as effective tools for public safety, they prey on stereotypes that depict unhoused persons as mere dim-witted drifters (Forte, 2015; Kramer & Lee, 1999) to be ignored and avoided. Contributing to literature on covert policing (e.g. Brodeur, 1995, 1992; Loftus & Goold, 2011; Marx, 1988; Skolnick, 1982), we focus on the operatives of deceptive police operations rather than the targets. Drawing on the results of freedom of information requests and media reporting, we also suggest that hobocop operations are reproduced by another rationality: police officer enjoyment of enacting the hobo identity.

This article is organized in four parts. First, we review literature on covert policing and deceptive police operations. After a note on method, we provide our analysis of media data and freedom of information disclosures. We argue that these encounters comprise a form of “deniable degradation” (Murray, 2000), involving police taking pleasure in embodying symbols of homelessness. We conclude with a discussion of how hobocop operations can be explored as an interdisciplinary encounter involving criminological literature on public policing and sociologies of deception.

2 Hobocops and Undercover Policing

Public police have targeted homeless persons for a long time as scapegoats for social problems and community malaise, construed variously as elements of social disorganization and broken windows (Bittner, 1967; Wakin, 2008; Wardhaugh, 1996; Williams, 2005; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). Yet police operatives posing as homeless persons is less common, and until recently has primarily been used in Canada and elsewhere as a part of buy-and-bust undercover drug stings. Deceptive encounters in hobocop policing operate in a similar manner to buy-and-bust operations (see Jacobs, 1993; Kruisbergen, de Jong, & Kleemans, 2011), though the major distinction is that buy-and-busts are directly related to criminal code violations, and hobocop operations in Canada have only targeted regulatory offences. Given the non-criminal orientation of the hobocop tactic, it entails a unique expansion of covert practices since they fall outside traditional notions of preventative operations (see Marx, 1988, pp. 63–65) in which targets are used for intelligence, or perhaps steered away or “softened” as an aspect of a criminal investigation.

Though the precise emergence of hobocop tactics remains unknown, Canadian police are not unique in using homeless identities for increasingly mundane covert work. Similar cases of police dressing as homeless people have been catalogued. For example, in spring 2003, police officers in Kissimmee, Florida dressed in tattered clothing and wore fake teeth while pushing a shopping cart to target traffic violators (see McAvoy, 2004). Police officers in Oregon, California, and elsewhere have been using the hobocop tactic for several years. Although we do not have space to document it here, it may be the case that Canadian policing agencies are involved in policy transfer with police in the United States, and it might be that Canadian police have borrowed this tactic from their US counterparts.

¹ “Hobos” is an English-language term that has historically been used as a slur against homeless or poor populations. Police and media have developed the term “hobocops”.

Handbooks on police investigations occasionally include material about what are referred to as non-conventional investigations, which would include the hobocop tactic. In such handbooks, for example in that of Girod (2014, pp. 39–40), police officers undertaking non-conventional investigations are instructed “to NOT stand out, be different, be out of place” but rather to “blend in”. As previously mentioned, poverty and homelessness are common in Canada’s urban centres. The instructions go on to advise police officers to invest time in disguise preparation and impersonation “by watching characters in movies, on TV, or in person” (ibid.). Thus, not only is this deception based on a physical projection of a false image or what, following Bubandt and Willerslev (2015), we call a dehumanizing mimesis, but in this way the hobocop tactic may be based on stereotypical representations of homeless persons found in media depictions, which tend to characterize the homeless as middle-aged alcoholics lacking dignity and worth, immoral, hooked on drugs, and deviant (Best, 2010; Calder, Richter, Burns & Mao, 2011; Forte, 2015; Parnaby, 2003; Shields, 2001).

Deception in law enforcement has long been a concern of policing scholars (Brodeur, 1995, 1992; Skolnick, 1982). Covert investigation is the focus of most existing literature on deception. Recent scholarship on covert investigations has suggested that these surveillance tactics are not confined to serious threats, but rather increasingly directed toward mundane activities (O’Neill & Loftus, 2013; Wilson & McCulloch, 2012). Loftus and Goold (2011, p. 278) have noted that, despite the increase in both police undercover tactics and academic attention to these developments, there remains “a pressing need for empirical research into the day-to-day practices of covert police surveillance”. While an expansion of undercover operations to a broadening spectrum of activities represents a trend toward the withering of traditional criminal law practices (Ericson, 2007; Wilson & McCulloch, 2012), it also signifies an increase in a substantive domain of police work – a growing field of policing operations that represents a potential shift in policing culture research. As Loftus, Goold & Mac Giollabhui (2016, p. 633) have suggested, scholars should attempt to re-engage with covert policing practices by theorizing these expanding domains as a distinct subculture (also see Marx, 1980). Based on research in the UK, Loftus, Goold & Mac Giollabhui (2016, p. 634) argue that the subculture of covert policing is “characterized by a set of attributes and norms that reflect the particular institutional arrangements and daily realities of covert policing and undercover life”. A significant dimension of this subculture stems from an inversion of “the logics of a uniformed and visible policing presence”.

Given that much of the scholarship on policing culture has focused on uniformed officers, a central trait in the theorization of police work has been the visibility – and disciplinary power – of the uniform (Goldsmith, 2010; Paperman, 2003). Undercover operations rupture the see/being seen dyad of policing public spaces and the communication of police presence. With an increasing focus on mundane “criminal” activities – of which texting in Canada is a mere regulatory offence – the proliferation of covert tactics has meant that poor people are subjected to ever more intrusive surveillance. O’Neill and Loftus (2013, p. 439) warn that these trends mean that “the least powerful members of society are falling into a widening net of social control, subject to an intensifying gaze of the state, but with an increasingly receding exit”.

That police are impersonating homeless people to crack down on minor regulatory infractions is a bleak irony in that the urban poor have been subjected to more vindictive, exclusive policing practices. Stuart (2015, p. 941) suggests that “police aggression toward the down-and-out has grown more formalized and normalized as it proliferates across America and the globe”. The urban poor are the primary targets for “hot spot”, “zero tolerance” and “broken windows” strategies, much of which attempts to disrupt the lives of poor people, who are considered barriers to economic development, gentrification, and tourism (Walby & Lippert, 2012; also see Eick, 2003). Numerous Canadian cities have adopted these policing strategies of gentrification, and the appropriation of homeless identities as a tool for covert policing reflects the way in which policing dehumanizes the people on whom their practices have dire effects. It may also be illustrative of the micro-aggressions that play out in policing cultures toward marginalized groups (Harkin, 2015).

Scholars of policing culture have accounted for how marginalized groups are maligned as “assholes” (Van Maanen, 1990), or in the Canadian context, “pukes” (Ericson, 1982), or as Fassin (2013) has noted in regard to the racialized poor in France, “bastards”. Much of the scholarship on police cultures has shown how law enforcement officers circulate strong self-conceptualizations of themselves as idealized citizens, as the front line against right and wrong, and as possessing an enhanced moral authority within society. This translates into an intuitive, or experiential, knowledge of how to suppress the bad guys, or, as Van Maanen (1990) details in forms of extra-legal practices, the need for “asshole control”. Intimately bound to the production of identities are the affective dynamics that are sustained by this moral order. This is illustrated most forcefully by the affective reactions that are bound to the communication of a police officer’s moral authority. When officers are challenged, reactions are often described in their affective dimensions: embarrassment, anger, vengefulness, and punitiveness (see Fassin, 2013; Reiner, 1992, pp. 107–137; Van Maanen, 1990). Manning (1997) has described how officers face “dramatic dilemmas” when police encounter difficulties in maintaining their

symbolic supremacy over moral order. The moral entrepreneurialism of police work has produced strong identities for insiders and outsiders, with the homeless typically serving as a symbolic outsider – the “first broken window”, as described by Wilson and Kelling (1982) – in the police imaginings of social problems.

In practice, these affective cultures of police work have produced stereotypes of poverty and deviance that function to legitimate revanchist policies aimed at removing unhoused persons from urban spaces (Belina & Helms, 2003; Berti & Sommers, 2010; Forte, 2015). With the enforcement of zero tolerance policing in urban centres, scholars have noted that accounts of gratuitous violence often have retaliatory and vengeful intonations (Fassin, 2013; Johnsen & Fitzpatrick, 2010; Smith, 1998, 1996). In the violence that is directed toward the urban poor and homeless populations there is something to be said about Bittner’s (1970, p. 7) warning that, though the police were created in the ideal of advancing non-violent social norms, there “is something of the dragon in the dragon-slayer”. These patterns of violence and antipathy are emblematic of not only a repressive function of brutality, but of an affective function of enjoyment. It is not merely the physical retaliation against the poor as nuisances, or as a form of collective punishment, but an outlet for the hypermasculinities of police subcultures to physically enjoy the violence directed toward those whose humanity is exceptionalized and rendered unintelligible.

In a different context, Kraska (1996, p. 407) has explored the transformative experience of ethnography where researchers enjoy activities that, in their “real” life, they would have found “morally or ideologically reprehensible”. In Kraska’s case, as one of the foremost critics of police militarization, his ethnography of what is euphemistically called a “training session” with police officers and military soldiers (it was more like an informal shooting range get-together) resulted in his (surprising) enjoyment of hypermasculinity, the sense of legal immunity, and the power of military-esque playfulness. A sense of power from the technologies, as well as an acceptance within the milieu of violence, was an affective pull on Kraska, who grappled with how his ethic against militarization was undone by the cultural affects of his encounter. In taking on the identity of a criminologist-as-gun-enthusiast, Kraska’s ethnographic account depicts how antipathies can be subsumed through a voyeuristic enjoyment of taking on alter – and opposite – identities. Following this, the affective dimension of a policing subculture can be explored in the ways in which violence is directed toward the homeless, as well as how the identity of homelessness is taken up as a playful tactic of covert policing. Similarly, as Loftus and Goold (2011, p. 282) note, “covert policing can be described as a form of street theatre. Officers use props, design scripts, and ‘act out’ in order to do their surveillance work and gather information”.

We conceptualize hobocop policing not only as a form of deception (see Bubandt & Willerslev, 2015; Gibson, 2014; Meltzer, 2003) that police enjoy but also as “deniable degradation” (Murray, 2000). This concept refers to “bureaucratic procedures that are justified in purely instrumental terms” but that are “inimical to human dignity” (Murray, 2000, p. 40). Deniable degradation does not involve public denunciation or verbal labelling. Rather, it involves a subtle humiliation embedded in a technical operation, and it evokes symbols reproducing dominant understandings of legitimate versus illegitimate human practices (ibid.). As we argue below, hobocop policing is a deniable degradation that police officers in Canada seem to take pleasure in. It involves subtle humiliation embedded in a public yet covert police operation. Below we detail the rise of hobocop tactics in Canada – with a focus on how police agents have demonstrated enjoyment of their appropriation of the hobo identity. Though the operations are justified as effective practices, we demonstrate that it is also affective practices that characterize policing agencies and agents who perform as hobocops.

3 Note on Method

Our exploration into hobocop tactics in Canada combines an analysis of media reports and the use of access to information and freedom of information legislation to produce textual records from the policing agencies that engage in these operations. We have conducted an extensive search of Canadian media for accounts of hobocop operations. After identifying these municipalities, we subsequently sent access to information (ATI) and freedom of information (FOI) requests for documents related to the operations. ATI/FOI law gives citizens the right to request government records. For all sites, we requested operation plans, post ops, reports, briefings, and media/communications materials.² All departments responded, with varying compliance and levels of disclosure, which is typical of using FOI to produce data sets.

Our data set only represents operations that have garnered media attention. In fact, a noteworthy element of the hobocop tactic – and an illustration that reflects its enjoyability – is that police departments have taken an active

² Access to information (ATI) requests were used to ask the RCMP for records. Freedom of information (FOI) requests were used to task municipal police services. For more on ATI and FOI requests, see Monaghan (2015) as well as Walby and Larsen (2012).

role in playfully publicizing hobocop stings. Police departments have taken to Twitter, issued press releases, and supported hobocop stings with media roll-outs. Given the media and public prominence of hobocops, we have collected materials on 14 stings from March 2012 to June 2015.³ At the same time as the events were publicized, the police were aware of the potential contentious nature and possibility of a certain degree of public criticism. Some police agencies have responded to our requests for documentation by stating that no records were produced in relation to the tactics. For example, in a letter response to our FOI request, Ottawa police argued that no records existed or were produced as part of the operation:

This "operation" was a proactive police trial exercise only by the Traffic Enforcement Unit stemming from prior knowledge of similar exercises done by other police services in the United States. No formal plan was put into place and no media release was completed, though our media section was advised in the case that they received calls from media outlets. No post-operation reports and briefs were completed. The only records created were Provincial Offence Notices that were issued to the involved offenders (OPS, 2016-178, p. 1).

In a similar rejection by the Victoria Police Department, the response indicated that "it should be noted that in circumstances such as those noted above, operational plans and post-operation reports are not required" (VPD, 2016-0139, p. 1). As a response to our request for records, the Ottawa and Victoria police demonstrate that deception is not only a matter of co-opting the hobo identity, but also managing access to records that may elicit further negative public reaction to these petty operations. Their response both downplays the decision-making process undertaken to enact the hobocop sting, and suggests that no collaboration with media occurred ahead of the sting. Given that the conservative Sun Media news chain had a camera crew deployed (visibly) with officers during the covert operation (Spears, 2012), there are reasons to be highly sceptical toward these *post facto* attempts at communications management.

By characterizing the operation as a trial exercise or pilot, Ottawa and Victoria police downplay any organizational decisions that transpire in authorizing covert policing, while legitimating the lack of recording keeping and documentation. This suggests covert policing is becoming more commonplace, without an accompanying increase in paperwork or oversight accounting for police actions. As other scholars have noted (e.g. Hier & Walby, 2014), police services often legitimate the deployment of new forms of surveillance and investigation by characterizing them as mere pilot projects. The explicit lack of documentation in this case adds weight to claims regarding practices of covert operations trending toward increasingly mundane and petty activities. Though Ottawa and Victoria police have attempted to characterize their foray as hobocops as spontaneous or as pilot projects, this claim contradicts the publicized rise of hobocop tactics across Canada, which we detail in the subsequent section below.

4 Hobocop Operations in Canada

The beginning of hobocop stings corresponds with a number of provinces passing legislation that penalizes texting while driving. As an infraction under highway or traffic acts, the penalization is not a criminal code offence but monetary fines or potential non-criminal penalties on individual driving records. Though distracted driving can contribute to accidents, deaths, and unnecessary costs for several levels of government (White, Eiser, & Harris, 2004), regulatory infractions are comparable to jaywalking, not wearing seat belts, or riding a bike without a bell.

Texting stings by undercover police officers originated in other jurisdictions and involved dressing like construction workers or city workers (in Calgary), a big Easter bunny (Hutchins, 2013), or commuters. All of these practices involve forms of what Skolnick (1982, p. 43) called "investigative deception". In May 2012, the *National Post* newspaper reported that "Across Canada over the past several weeks, police officers have been dressing as panhandlers and clutching cardboard signs to mimic the curbside come-ons in order to get close enough to see drivers using handheld phones while driving" (Humphreys, 2012). As the *National Post* reported, "The tactic is dubbed Hobo Cops". Almost immediately following the national media coverage of the hobocop tactic, policing agencies engaged in what Luscombe and Lufty (2015) call a "monkey see, monkey do" exercise where the practices (and prominence) of one agency rationalize mimicry by other agencies. Subsequent to the media coverage, the acceptability of engaging in hobocops – and reporting on the operations in cooperation with the media – spread across the country.

As an aspect of the enjoyment of appropriating homeless identities, police officers took deliberate actions to impersonate the poor. This deceptive fabrication (Meltzer, 2003) is undertaken to lure potential targets of the

³ These include Chilliwack 2012, Salmon Arm 2012, Ottawa 2012, Halton 2012, Burlington 2012, Edmonton 2013, Durham 2013, Toronto 2014, Victoria 2014, Scarborough 2014, Montreal 2015, Vernon 2015, Hamilton 2015, and Steinbach 2016.

investigation close enough to garner information to issue a ticket or lay a charge. In their sociology of undercover work, Loftus and Goold (2011, p. 282) have demonstrated that public police using covert tactics “carefully craft and manage their own appearance to ensure that it corresponds with that of the subject”. The crafting of an appearance to look homeless is evident in many of the operations taken – and publicized – by Canadian police. In what appears to be the first hobocop operation, an RCMP Constable named Bryan Martell, in Chilliwack, British Columbia, donned “a hoodie pulled up over a baseball cap with a pair of baggy, combat fatigue pants while clutching his greasy, cardboard sign written in all capital letters” (Humphreys, 2012). An older-looking officer in Ottawa, with several days of beard growth and an old, torn plaid jacket worn over a hoody, carried a cardboard sign that read: “My name is Constable Jesty of the Ottawa Police. If you are on your cellphone, you are about to get a ticket. God bless” (Spears, 2012). In Toronto, an officer held a cardboard sign that read on one side: “I’ve got High Hopes – Frank Sinatra.” When flipped over, the sign then read: “Hello, I am a police officer. If you are reading this you are about to get a cellphone ticket” (Gallant, 2014). Not to be outdone, an RCMP corporal in Salmon Arm, British Columbia, had spelling errors and a smiley face drawn on his sign while wearing a tousled wig and using a single crutch (Humphreys, 2012).

In attempting to represent the authenticity of poverty, the police are reported to have been highly successful in their “gotcha” efforts. In Scarborough during March 2014, Toronto police laid 150 distracted driving charges in five days (Gallant, 2014). Their success was also reported in numerous press reports where individuals trapped by the hobo tactic acknowledged the effectiveness of the ruse. Police officers also commented on their authenticity. For example, RCMP Constable Bryan Martell said: “One guy tried to give me McDonald’s,” adding that he had to politely turn down the offer (Hutchins, 2013). The Ottawa hobocop, Officer Jesty, was reported as saying: “I’ve had money thrown at me. I’ve been offered fruits and vegetables, all kinds of ridiculous things” (LaFlamme, 2012). As a demonstration of contempt toward the homeless, Jesty refers to gifts that panhandlers would receive from the public as “ridiculous things”.

Hobocops are illustrative of a latent conflict with the poor, but also the police enjoyment of appropriating their identity. In addition to the careful, impish grooming of well-paid police officers to appear as authentic panhandlers, the hobocop tactic has worked as a media/communications tool for police agencies. In describing how the Toronto police adopted the idea of using hobocop tactics, Constable Randall Arsenault said: “It was an idea that came out of the platoon and I didn’t even know they [other agencies] were doing it.” Then Arsenault adds: “I saw the guy dressed like that and I thought that’s cool. So I took his picture” (Warmington, 2014). Arsenault, a media and community relations officer, then posted the picture on Twitter.

The police enjoyment of voyeuristic panhandling is evident in records from the RCMP pertaining to a hobocop operation undertaken in June 2015 in Vernon, British Columbia. Depicted in Figure 1 that was released on Twitter, RCMP Corporal Mark Taylor dressed in plain clothes and stood on a Vernon, BC, street holding a folded cardboard sign that read, in the top half, “I am not homeless”. When Taylor unfolded his sign, it revealed him to be an “RCMPolice looking for seat belts/cellphones”.

Email exchanges between Taylor and his colleagues are illustrative of an affective dimension evident in hobocop operations. At the conclusion of the operation, Taylor wrote an email to his boss, Terry Mclachlan, that said: “Sir: We thought we would try something a little different to combat seat belt and cellphone compliance. It worked very well with 11 stats in a little over an hour!!” (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 3). The effusiveness becomes even more pronounced when media relations officers join the conversation and shift from the discussion of “stats” to their promotion of the hobocop operation. Immediately after the relatively short one-hour sting, media relations officer Gord Molendyk sent pictures of Taylor (above) accompanying a press release to media agencies. The media release warned: “Be aware you will likely see our friendly sign man again in and around the city” (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 9). Emails related to the media release between Molendyk, another media relations officer named Corporal Ronda Rempel, and Taylor illustrate some of the enjoyment that the hobocop operations – as well as the media promotion – engender in police.

Rempel writes: “Hello Gents, Am I ok to tweet this pic out? Great initiative ... Let me know.”

Taylor responds: “Good with me ... does this make me a star???”

Mclachlan, the supervising officer, replies: “Hollywood may be calling by the end of the week.”

Taylor signs off the conversation with: “Sounds good” (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 15).



Figure 1: RCMP Corporal Mark Taylor (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 7).

Upon distribution of the press release, news agencies (including the *Washington Post*) respond with queries. One journalist with infotelnews.ca asks to “tag along with our friendly neighbourhood sign man next time he hits the street” (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 30). Molendyk forwards the request to a redacted officer with the lines: “Here is a not [sic] from one of your fans. *Enjoy*” (RCMP, 2016–2199, p. 30 – emphasis added).

In a separate news report related to the June 2015 hobocop operation in Vernon BC, Molendyk suggested to the media “there’s no law saying we can’t do it” (Seymour, 2015). As a demonstration of how policing agencies can flout legal grey zones in a manner that would put other denizens at risk of criminalization, the police deceptively conceal their identity and deploy visibility strategically. It is a power that homeless persons lack – they are both undervalued and hyper-valued depending on the context. When not being overlooked, government officials (particularly the police) scrutinize the identity of homeless people in routine but degrading ways (Murray, 2000). Not only does the hobocop tactic flout legal ambiguities and the public police capacity to impose non-negotiated solutions with the implicit threat of state sanctions, but hobocop practices illustrate an element of enjoyment and a self-generated belief that these tactics are harmless – or even humorous. In a March 2012 hobocop operation in Chilliwack BC, an RCMP constable, Bryan Martell, reported to media that “giving people tickets, people usually aren’t happy about it in any case, but in this, I think people found the humour in it partly, so they were less angry than they usually are getting a ticket” (Oleson, 2012).

Not all were as pleased to receive the tickets as the police were to dispense them, and police who have engaged in hobo tactics have met a degree of criticism. Stemming from the Ottawa 2012 hobocop sting, one woman who received a ticket told media she would fight it in court (LaFlamme, 2012). Some from the conservative media have considered the operations a new form of covert taxation, and homeless people were not pleased with these operations either. One homeless man thought the operation was a “sneaky trick” because the police often ticketed homeless people with panhandling or interfering with traffic at the very spot police used to lure distracted drivers (Mackey, 2012). Concerns were also raised as to whether undercover police posing as panhandlers would have a negative chilling effect on trust factors, which are integral for the circulation of curbside economies. Similarly, in Regina in the summer of 2016, one man claimed he took off his seat belt to

reach into his pocket to grab some change to give to a man he believed was homeless. Moments later he was being pulled over by the police and given a ticket for not wearing a seat belt (Global News, 2016), an example of what Ericson (1981) referred to as the way policing agents “make crime”.

It is worth pointing out that some police agencies have distanced themselves from the tactic. For example, after public criticism in Toronto in 2014, the Toronto Police Service became defensive when a conservative columnist criticized the tactic as a “money grab” (Warmington, 2014). In a news report printed the following day, spokesperson Constable Clinton Stibbe took a pusillanimous tack by suggesting that the undercover officer – who carried the cardboard sign with the Frank Sinatra quote, baggy jeans, and a hoody – had no intention of impersonating a homeless person or a panhandler. Stibbe claimed: “At no point did the individual put himself up to be a panhandler or asked for money or pretend to be a homeless individual, so the phrase (‘hobocop’), you have to wonder if it’s really accurate?” (Yuen, 2014). After officers dressed as hobocops in Montreal and the public voiced strong criticisms, police spokesperson Ian Lafreniere claimed the officers were acting on their own initiative, simply mimicking other jurisdictions. Though the Montreal case nonetheless represents the enjoyment had by front-line officers, the management are attuned to the optics of impersonating panhandlers. The spokesperson iterated this concern, noting that “The initiative [to seek] out people committing that bad habit was good — but the way of doing it was inappropriate...That’s not going to happen again” (Rukavina, 2015). In cases of criticism against the hobocop tactic, police agencies have reiterated that the performance is effective at combating texting.

Despite the rapid replication of hobocop tactics across Canada, some police agencies have recognized problems with the hobocop practice. Documents from one police force relay the claims of effectiveness. In April 2015, Hamilton police decided to combat texting. An operation plan for the sting outlined how heightened enforcement of cellphone regulations has “led drivers to begin holding their phones lower on the lap, below the normal view of other vehicles” (HP, 2016–0222, p. 2). Noting the “unique problem for police and many jurisdictions”, the plan details how police services in Halton, Ottawa, Toronto, Manitoba, and British Columbia have “used plain clothes officers standing at intersections to monitor traffic for cellphone violations”. However, the plan outlines a principled distinction from the other agencies. It states: “Although in other jurisdictions officers would often dress up as homeless persons, *the same effect* could be achieved wearing normal plain clothes and standing near bus stops” (ibid. – emphasis added). Moreover, the plan concludes: “This would also fall into compliance with Policy & Procedure 1.23 A1(1): All members while on duty shall project a professional image.” In other words, the Hamilton police note that the hobocop tactic is not based on a sense of professional, impartial policing and, like Montreal, have distanced themselves from the tactic.

Whether these police agencies distanced themselves for professional/technical reasons (Hamilton) or ethical reasons (Montreal), they are nonetheless outliers. In Toronto and Ottawa, police agencies have attempted to justify the tactics on the grounds of their efficacy. Notably, Canada’s largest police service, the RCMP, have accelerated their use of hobocop tactics. At the conclusion of a recent 2016 hobocop sting in Steinbach (a town in Manitoba) publicized through Twitter, RCMP Sgt Bert Paquet said the tactic was “fair game”, adding a threat that he could soon be visiting other neighbourhoods (Lunney, 2016). Speaking again to the conservative *Sun* newspaper chain, the interview concluded by asking Paquet if he had received any change from motorists. The report ends by claiming: “‘No, I don’t think there were any cash donations,’ [Paquet] said *with a chuckle*” (Lunney, 2016 – emphasis added).

5 Discussion and Conclusions

Given that the regulation of texting is a low-level regulatory offence *and* that other interventions may be just as (or more) effective as hobocops, why do the police undertake such a dramatic and derogatory form of undercover policing? Emphasizing the affective dimension of hobocop operations can help explain why these tactics have proliferated. In terms of a conceptual contribution, we have staged an interdisciplinary encounter involving criminological literature on public policing and sociologies of deception. We have argued that such operations involve pleasure and enjoyment for individual police officers, and that these operations can be theorized as a form of deniable degradation. Overall, these deceptive encounters are predicated on the reproduction of demeaning stereotypes in relation to homelessness. Though homelessness is a multifaceted lived experience (Borchard, 2010; Gibson, 2004; Lee & Farrell, 2003; Wright, 2009), such stereotypes reduce homelessness to danger and risk (also see Calder, Richter, Burns & Mao, 2011), while simultaneously revealing the submerged antipathies toward the poor that remain entrenched in policing culture. Hobocop practices are a deniable degradation because police deny that the operations have anything to do with demeaning the homeless, yet their performances are based on disgracing tropes and a dehumanization of the lived experiences of poverty.

Those experiences of poverty are nothing more than “ridiculous things” that are treated by public police as peripheral to the emergent problem of texting at stop lights.

In terms of an empirical contribution, we have shown that use of the hobocop tactic has become common across police services in Canada. As acts of deniable degradation, policing agencies – well versed in liberal communication strategies of inclusion – do not acknowledge the petty enjoyment of dressing up as the homeless. Although our methods of analysing declassified and unofficial accounts cannot provide a quantifiable knowledge of hobocop activity, we do underline how these police practices reveal undertheorized affective dimensions of police culture. Contributing to studies of deception that have examined why people in power try to emulate, take up, or dress up as members of oppressed or marginalized communities (see Gibson, 2014), we have shown that public police take pleasure in mocking homeless persons. Meanwhile, despite high levels of tickets during the operations, whether there is any intervention in distracted driving because of this tactic remains doubtful. As noted, there appears to be a concerted effort to continue (if not expand) the use of hobocops. The recent use by RCMP in small towns is a case in point. Carson (2007) suggests the price tag of a type of investigation is a major determinant of whether an investigative technique will be used by public police. Obviously hobocop operations are not as costly as deeper covert operations – and the likelihood of high-cost legal challenges is small. Given the regulatory nature of the intervention, the practices of hobocops will operate outside of significant court challenges, or even the oversight of police boards or elected officials. There are few, very remote, avenues for legal remedies against the use of such tactics on technical or principled grounds. Yet the hobocop tactic is injurious in circulating stereotypes about homeless persons. The fact that public police take pleasure in enacting these stereotypes suggests that the hobocop tactic reveals that these actions are not based on a sense of professional, impartial policing. Given the crude planning that goes into hobocop operations and the twisted enjoyment derived from it by individual officers and office staff, these consequences are “desirable and intended” (Brodeur, 1995, p. 86). Our argument has been that this tactic acts as a shield (Brodeur, 1995, p. 93) allowing public police to take pleasure in portraying crime scapegoats and perpetual targets for police discrimination and abuse. In the same vein, John Clarke of the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty similarly argued that the tactic could “lead to greater public distrust of the homeless” (Gallant, 2014). This, among other reasons (see Marx, 1988, p. 159; Nathan, 2017), is why undercover policing and covert policing operations should be subjected to greater scrutiny and critique. Harkin (2015) argues that stigmatization should be thought of as one of the pains inflicted by public police. Though the police deny it, hobocop policing and the deceptive encounters it entails is yet another plank in the police stigmatization of homelessness in Canada today.

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