Police brutality in the United States

Police brutality in the United States, the unwarranted or excessive and often illegal use of force against civilians by U.S. police officers. Forms of police brutality have ranged from assault and battery (e.g., beatings) to mayhem, torture, and murder. Some broader definitions of police brutality also encompass harassment (including false arrest), intimidation, and verbal abuse, among other forms of mistreatment.

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civil rights movement

Civil rights demonstrator being attacked by police dogs, May 3, 1963, Birmingham, Alabama.

Bill Hudson/AP Images

African Americans and police brutality

Americans of all races, ethnicities, ages, classes, and genders have been subjected to police brutality. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, for example, poor and working-class whites expressed frustration over discriminatory policing in northern cities. At about the same time, Jewish and other immigrants from southern and eastern Europe also complained of police brutality against their communities. In the 1920s many urban police departments, especially in large cities such as New York and Chicago, used extralegal tactics against members of Italian-immigrant communities in efforts to crack down on organized crime. In 1943 officers of the Los Angeles Police Department were complicit in attacks on Mexican Americans by U.S. servicemen during the so-called Zoot Suit Riots, reflecting the department's history of hostility toward Hispanics (Latinos). Regular harassment of homosexuals and transgender persons by police in New York City culminated in 1969 in the Stonewall riots, which were triggered by a police raid on a gay bar; the protests marked the beginning of a new era of militancy in the international gay rights movement. And in the aftermath of the 2001 September 11 attacks, Muslim Americans began to voice complaints about police brutality, including harassment and racial profiling. Many local law-enforcement agencies launched covert operations of questionable legality designed to surveil and infiltrate mosques and other Muslim American organizations in an effort to uncover presumed terrorists, a practice that went unchecked for at least a decade.

Notwithstanding the variety among groups that have been subjected to police brutality in the United States, the great majority of victims have been African American. In the estimation of most experts, a key factor explaining the predominance of African Americans among victims of police brutality is antiblack racism among members of

mostly white police departments. Similar prejudices are thought to have played a role in police brutality committed against other historically oppressed or marginalized groups.

Whereas racism is thought to be a major cause of police brutality directed at African Americans and other ethnic groups, it is far from the only one. Other factors concern the unique institutional culture of urban police departments, which stresses group solidarity, loyalty, and a “show of force” approach to any perceived challenge to an officer’s authority. For rookie officers, acceptance, success, and promotion within the department depend upon adopting the attitudes, values, and practices of the group, which historically have been infused with antiblack racism.

Because African Americans have been the primary—though certainly not the only—target of police brutality in the United States, the remainder of this article will deal mainly with their experiences, both historically and in the present day.

The Great Migration

Interactions between African Americans and urban police departments were initially shaped by the Great Migration (1916–70) of African Americans from the rural South into urban areas of the North and West, especially following World War II. Most white communities, including white police departments, were unaccustomed to the presence of African Americans and reacted to their increasing numbers with fear and hostility, attitudes that were exacerbated by deeply ingrained racist stereotypes. Reflecting the beliefs of many whites, northern police departments acted upon the presumption that African Americans, and especially African American men, possessed an inherent tendency toward criminal behaviour, one that required constant surveillance of African Americans and restrictions on their movements (segregation) in the interests of white safety. Accordingly, by the mid-1950s many urban police departments had implicitly reconceived their missions as essentially that of policing African Americans—i.e., protecting whites against blacks.

The forms of police brutality to which this situation gave rise were variable and generally not limited to physical assault (e.g., beatings) and excessive use of force. They also included unlawful arrests, verbal abuse (e.g., racial slurs) and threats, sexual assaults against African American women, and police homicides (murders of civilians by police). Police were also sometimes complicit in drug dealing, prostitution, burglaries, protection schemes, and gun-smuggling within African American neighbourhoods.

Although police brutality against African Americans had become a serious problem in many urban areas by the mid-20th century, most whites remained unaware of it until about the mid-1960s, in large part because most large-city newspapers (whose readerships were primarily white) did not consider it newsworthy. In contrast, incidences of police brutality were regularly covered in the black press from the early 20th century, frequently in front-page articles. Likewise, local and national civil rights organizations collected thousands of affidavits and letters from African Americans documenting their direct experiences of police brutality.

Police brutality after World War II

For a variety of reasons, incidences of police brutality against African Americans became more frequent and more intense throughout the country in the decades following World War II. First, the victory of the forces of democracy in the war overseas created among African Americans expectations of greater freedom and democracy at home, especially as many of them had served in combat in the U.S. armed forces (albeit in racially segregated units). As black Americans began to assert their formal rights and liberties, demanding that they be respected by local governments, judiciaries, and law-enforcement agencies, their demands had the effect of reinforcing the tendency of white police officers to view themselves as protectors of white communities.

Second, the migration of rural whites to nearby cities in search of better economic opportunities encouraged police to view their own violence against African Americans as a more acceptable means of control than the mob hysteria that rural whites had been accustomed to and that urban spaces simply did not allow. In effect, police brutality replaced lynchings as a means of oppressing blacks. During this period, white supremacist and terrorist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council operated openly in Southern cities, where police brutality against African Americans was abetted by government and political leaders, district attorneys, and judges, among others.

Third, in other cities, especially in the North, the flight of whites to the suburbs and the natural growth of the African American population made African Americans more visible and allowed them to be more mobile within formerly white areas. Such demographic changes made African Americans as a group appear more threatening to white police officers and allowed the latter to more easily justify extralegal tactics as a means of controlling African Americans' mobility and limiting their use of public spaces.

Fourth, beginning in the 1970s, African Americans who had joined local police forces in large numbers as a result of aggressive recruitment and affirmative action programs themselves committed serious acts of brutality against African American civilians, in part because they wished to be seen as "good cops" and to be otherwise accepted within their departments.

Finally, the escalation of urban crime rates in the 1970s and '80s, including in predominantly African American and other minority neighbourhoods, strengthened the perception among white police officers and whites generally of African Americans as inherently criminal, a trend also reflected in a newly racially charged political and policy discourse, referred to by critics as the criminalization of the black poor and working class.

Police brutality and race riots

From the 1960s, police brutality was a catalyst for many of the race riots (riots caused by racial dissensions or hatreds) that took place in urban America, including the Watts Riots of 1965 and the Detroit Riot of 1967. In 1980 the Liberty City section of Miami erupted over the police killing of an unarmed African American man. During a period of three days, 18 people were killed and some 1,000 arrested, and more than $100 million in property

damage was committed. Twelve years later the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers and their subsequent acquittal on charges of assault with a deadly weapon and excessive use of force triggered the Los Angeles Riots of 1992, still considered the worst race riots in American history. During a period of six days, more than 50 people were killed and more than 2,300 were injured, and property damage was estimated at about $1 billion. In 2014 the fatal shooting of an unarmed African American teenager, Michael Brown, by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and a grand jury's subsequent decision not to indict the officer on criminal charges provoked rioting in that city. Later race riots (along with peaceful demonstrations) followed the deaths in police custody of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland (2015), and George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota (2020), both of whom were African American.

Los Angeles Riots of 1992: National Guardsman standing watch

A National Guardsman standing watch in Los Angeles in late April 1992, during rioting that raged in reaction to the acquittal of white Los Angeles policemen who had been captured on videotape a year earlier beating an African American, Rodney King, while King resisted arrest.

Antibrutality campaigns

Most victims of police brutality, including not only African Americans but also whites and other ethnic groups, have come from the ranks of the poor and low-income working classes. They have consequently lacked significant political influence or the financial resources that are sometimes necessary to effectively publicize complaints of police brutality. Nevertheless, antibrutality campaigns have been mounted in nearly every major U.S. city with a sizable black population. In sometimes large demonstrations, members of victimized communities have demanded, in addition to an end to police brutality and accountability for guilty officers, major reforms including the hiring of more African American police officers and the placement of more African American officers in supervisory positions, racially integrated patrols or black-only patrols in African American neighbourhoods, civilian review boards, and federal investigation (e.g., by the Justice Department) of egregious cases of police brutality. Their tactics have included sit-ins, boycotts, picketing, and close monitoring of police activity, including (from the late 20th century) by means of videos taken with handheld cameras and mobile telephones.

In 2014 the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner—the latter an African American resident of Staten Island who had been held in a prolonged illegal choke hold by a white police officer—led antibrutality activists to start a powerful social movement, Black Lives Matter. The movement subsequently played a prominent role in nationwide protests following other extreme acts of police brutality against African Americans. In retaliatory attacks in 2016, five white members of the Dallas, Texas, police department and three police officers in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, were shot and killed.

Antibrutality campaigns tended to be led by activists at the grassroots level and by other members of the communities directly affected rather than by more-established civil rights organizations such as the National

Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League, whose memberships were drawn primarily from the black middle class. Indeed, black middle-class support for antibrutality protests was often limited, largely because, like their white counterparts, middle-class blacks generally favoured tough crime-fighting measures to protect themselves and their property from black criminals. Because they were relatively inexperienced as leaders, however, antibrutality activists often used direct and confrontational methods, preferring street protests over negotiations. And because they generally lacked an institutional base and a clear strategy, they were often reactionary, acting in an ad hoc fashion and creating organizations and developing constituencies as the need arose. Despite such limitations, they were usually effective, because they articulated the anger of their constituencies, who were generally suspicious of electoral politics (“the system”) and who had no faith that black politicians would adequately address their concerns.

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