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"Is police brutality really a race issue?" Yes, 100%



Dimitri Antoniou Jun 1, 2020 · 7 min read

Each time the murder of a person of color is caught on camera, media and public attention spikes in its focus on police brutality and racial violence. Sadly, the spike includes a range of perspectives, including people questioning the claims of police brutality and others challenging the notion that this has anything to do with race. Here's why police brutality is 100% a racial issue.

First of all, police brutality isn't *exclusively* a racial issue. Anyone can be brutalized by the police, regardless of your background. So the first-hand experience of this kind of violence is valid, real, and painful. But police brutality as a whole is a *different* problem from police brutality against people of color.

With that in mind, police brutality is a highly racialized issue that disproportionately affects communities of color. Here is the tl;dr version

- Today's laws and policies are an evolved and disguised form of norms established during slavery, Jim Crowe, and The New Jim Crowe eras
- Widely conducted research affirms that our criminal justice system is racist in almost every way imaginable

- People of color, particularly black men, are far and away the most impacted groups by police violence, even accounting for their relative size in our population

To understand more about today's violence, you have to back track in history. America's history with race is an ugly one: construction of our country on the labor of black slaves, maturation using explicit segregation and oppression, and modernization with hidden systems of racial violence and marginalization.

Why? The historical narrative

Our judicial system was founded and developed during explicitly racist periods where the oppression of black people was hard coded into law. Refer back to statutes like the Fugitive Slave Law passed in 1793, which allowed for the re-capture of slaves escaping from one state to another. Then fast forward to the Jim Crow system of the late 1870s-1960s, which combined laws with social norms into a formalized caste system.

Example Laws included:

- *Barbers.* No colored barber shall serve as a barber (to) white girls or women (Georgia).
- *Buses.* All passenger stations in this state operated by any motor transportation company shall have separate waiting rooms or space and separate ticket windows for the white and colored races (Alabama).
- *Education.* The schools for white children and the schools for negro children shall be conducted separately (Florida).
- *Prisons.* The warden shall see that the white convicts shall have separate apartments for both eating and sleeping from the negro convicts (Mississippi).

Example social norms included:

- A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male because it implied being socially equal. Obviously, a black male could not offer his hand or any other part of his body to a white woman, because he risked being accused of rape.
- Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public, especially kissing, because it offended whites.

- Whites did not use courtesy titles of respect when referring to blacks, for example, Mr., Mrs., Miss., Sir, or Ma'am. Instead, blacks were called by their first names. Blacks had to use courtesy titles when referring to whites, and were not allowed to call them by their first names.
- White motorists had the right-of-way at all intersections.

The combination of these laws and norms targeted all aspects of life. And as the country progressed towards more progressive values through the Civil Rights Movement, these same norms morphed into less explicit, but equally as dangerous, restrictions. In the modern context, the same caste system exists, hidden within our criminal justice system.

In her book “The New Jim Crowe,” Michelle Alexander explains how the mass incarceration of black men is a targeted attack on people of color and has restricted the very rights supposedly gained during the civil rights movement:

“Alexander shows that, by targeting black men through the War on Drugs and decimating communities of color, the U.S. criminal justice system functions as a contemporary system of racial control, even as it formally adheres to the principle of colorblindness.” — The New Jim Crowe, About

All of which brings us to today, 2020. Having elected a black president the country at large applauds itself on how much progress we've made. But in truth, little has changed from any of these previous eras of structural racial inequality. What does it look like today?

What? Proof of racial violence in today's criminal justice system

There is well documented research from a variety of reputable sources that link race/ethnicity with likelihood of being a victim of police violence. While black men are the most victimized, the pattern does extend to other people of color.

To get it out of the way, the counter-argument goes something like, ‘But more white people are killed by police each year than black people; more black people kill white people than the other way around; black men are responsible for x% of all murders.’ But these arguments fall apart under the light of intense study and statistical testing.

The Washington Post published a collection of extensive findings from dozens of different sources documenting racial bias in every aspect of our criminal justice system. Here's a set of examples that trace injustice throughout the entire lifecycle of the criminal justice system:

- “Black people comprise about 12.5 percent of drug users but 29 percent of arrests for drug crimes and 33 percent of those incarcerated.”
- “Harris County, Tex., Black people comprise 20 percent of the Harris County population but made up 62 percent of the wrongful drug convictions.”
- “Between 2003 and 2012, prosecutors in Caddo Parish, La. — one of the most aggressive death penalty counties in the country — struck 46 percent of prospective black jurors with preemptory challenges, vs. 15 percent of nonblacks”
- In a 2010 study, “mock jurors” were given the same evidence from a fictional robbery case but then shown alternate security camera footage depicting either a light-skinned or dark-skinned suspect. Jurors were more likely to evaluate ambiguous, race-neutral evidence against the dark-skinned suspect as incriminating and more likely to find the dark-skinned suspect guilty.
- “A study of North Carolina murder cases from 1980 through 2007 found that murderers who kill white people are three times more likely to get the death penalty than murderers who kill black people.”

The site Mapping Police Violence reviewed 100 cases in which police killed unarmed black people in 2015, and the results were disturbing. They show black people being targeted, AND the justice system protecting the murderers of these citizens and withholding proper justice. Unarmed black people were killed at 5x the rate of unarmed whites in 2015. Fewer than 9 of 104 cases where an unarmed black person was killed by police resulted in officers being charged with a crime without being called a mistrial or resulting in dropped charges. ***Of the 4 convictions of the 104 cases, none were sentenced to serve more than 4 years in prison.***

The list goes on, and the collection is worth browsing to get a scope of how far reaching and drastic the inequities are. The key takeaway is that data backs up the idea our

criminal justice system is widely and dramatically racist, from stops to arrests, from jury selection to conviction, and through parole and incarceration.

3. Police violence against people of color

Most relevant to the current conversation: yes, police brutality disproportionately impacts people of color. The Proceedings of National Academy of Science published a report that assessed the risk of being killed by police in the US by age, race, and sex. Black men face 1 in 1,000 odds of being killed by police, which means they are 2.5x more likely than white men. Black men and women, American Indian and Alaska Native men and women, and latino men are *all* more likely to be killed by police than are white men.

It's worth noting (in direct response to common counter-argument) that the study was conducted by constructing groups of 100,000 and defining risk out of that population. That leaves us with directly comparable likelihoods that account for how many raw numbers result. Take a look for yourself:



The data is convincing and horrifying, but it is also only one piece of the puzzle. The other side is the qualitative, the lived experience of so many people of color in America.

The counter-arguments I listed only come from non-black people questioning the validity of the experience of being stopped or harassed for no reason. Sadly, this is a true and accepted experience throughout the black American populace.

Only recently has ‘proof’ (as critics might define it) of these experiences come out through the use of dashboard and body cameras. And if you doubt the racial nature of this brutality, I encourage you to watch for yourself, though I warn you of the graphic and violent content. The New York Times compiled dozens of videos you can watch [here](#).

Is police brutality a racial issue? Do black people suffer more from police violence than others? Are more black people killed by police, proportionate to their population, than whites? Does our criminal justice system protect officers from violence against people of color? Sadly, yes on all accounts.

If you disagree, or agree and have more insight, or just want to discuss this further, please reach out. I believe it is the responsibility of all white people in this country to educate ourselves and each other in order to bring this violence to an end.

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