Sam Harris podcast thoughts

Harris unwittingly makes two fairly convincing arguments: that strict gun control needs to be made a serious priority; and that police need to be defunded.

According to Harris, the presence of a gun in a police encounter means any resistance to arrest could be life or death (for the officer). Even if the civilian doesn't have a gun of their own, the officer's gun can be reached for and potentially used against the officer (a fear that Harris himself said led to the death of at least one Black man). Armed police mean there is a 100% chance that a firearm is present in a police encounter. Harris suggests this is justifies the use of force, and fatal force in particular, in many police

encounters. A cop just never knows if they will lose control of their own gun, so better to kill the civilian, just in case. In that respect, removing a guns from the equation, or significantly reducing the likelihood (currently at 100% likelihood) that a gun is present, would reduce fatal police encounters. This is an argument for a weapons buyback program for civilians, restrictions on the types of firearms that are legal, and disarming street-level patrol officers.

On the second point Harris unwittingly makes, Harris says a lot of police encounters result in (fatal) force is because police are "undertrained", "unskilled", "not prepared", or "placed into difficult or impossible situations". He's probably totally correct here (a characteristic of his rhetorical style: everything he says has a hint of truth,

making it seem like he is the rational and enlightened one). Yet, he fails to investigate at all why this is the case: why are police so undertrained, so unprepared, and then put in these situations? How can any of this be the case when police spending is such a huge part of cities' budgets? In most cities, police spending is both one of the largest budget items, and one of the only items that is growing year-over-year. In LA, it's $1.5 billion dollar police budget more than half of the city's general budget fund, Chicago spends $1.4 billion (38% of its general budget), Houston spends $850 million (35%). In Toronto it just exceeded 1 billion dollars, and occupies the largest single use of property taxes in the area.

How is it possible that the institution that regularly receives the largest pool of government money, and whose budgets are increasing, is so ill-prepared? It seems fairly clear that the lack of competence among police Harris identifies as such a problem is not caused by a lack of funding. Harris doesn't come to this conclusion, but the fact that white people, too, are subject to police violence and murdered by police; the ineptitude or police that resulted in death; or the "difficult situations for police"; are all indictments of policing in general and support the idea that the absolutely humongous budgets for police should be reigned in.

Harris, then, has crafted a pretty cunning argument for defunding the police. The absolutely massive police budgets are obviously not being directed towards the training and education that police need to avoid being murderers.

Further to Harris's point, however, is that police are often put in what he refers to as "difficult and impossible situations". Why, then, are police being put into those situations? Are police, perhaps, not the most effective tool for that situation? In other words, the largest proportion of public spending is on punitive and reactionary interventions into social issues, rather than investing in actual community development and social welfare, and law enforcement – despite it's massive budget – is clearly neither appropriate, nor competent, in these situations. Moreover, police not especially effective, irrespective of training and despite their budgets, at preventing a wide variety of crimes, including theft, domestic abuse, and sexual assault.

While police budgets have continued to grow, almost every other government program, including things like education and infrastructure, not to mention social welfare and safety net programs, has seen regular, significant cuts. This has resulted in the deterioration of public education, the severe under-paying of teachers, the need for teachers to spend money out of pocket, the allocation of about $1.25 per student to school lunches, the denial of school lunches to poor children, lack of research into and community programs to deal with addiction, abuse, and mental health. The existence and accessibility of private and semi-private/charter schools in the US has meant that affluent families can rise above many of the harms caused by anemic public spending.

If a larger proportion of public dollars were spent on social programs, education, housing, health and mental health, anti-poverty initiatives, etc., then a very large proportion of the issues that police are asked to deal with would be considerably reduced or eliminated. Many of the "difficult or impossible" situations would take place less often, in less intense ways, and could perhaps be diffused by other, specialist means.

So Harris makes a really great argument for defunding the police and controlling guns!

But he also makes a lot of racist points. Most obviously, his calls for a rejection of identity politics and desire for a post-racial society suggests a willingness to dismiss the role played by race and racialization in identity formation and life experience. This kind of "I don't see colour" whitewashing denies differences that are extremely important and erases historical inequalities that persist.

He also denies the existence of institutionalized and systemic racism. In addressing the overrepresentation of Black people in police encounters he cites statistics showing that Black people (13% of the US population) account for about half of the country's crimes. It is for this reason, he argues, that Black people are overrepresented in police statistics including death at the hands of police. While that might explain why Black people are

overrepresented in police stats, it doesn't do anything to examine the prevalence of Black crime, Black-on-Black violence and why such a significant disparity in crime and violence exists across race lines. He also uses statistics about Black on Black murder to neuter arguments about race-based violence, as if Black on Black murder is, again, just an inherent attribute of Black people. Black on Black murder does not mean racism isn't a thing. Black on Black crime is the result of institutional and systemic racism that puts Black people and Black communities in painful and desperate situations.

It's not as if Black people and Black communities are naturally crime-prone; that Black people are just inherently violent, morally bereft, and enjoy crime. But if you erase race, deny racism, and reject intersectionality, as Harris does, all you are left with is an image of a Black person who just can't help but commit crime and murder, with only a thin blue line standing in the way of a violent Black crime spree (Okay, I'm editorializing and being a bit hyperbolic here....).

What's galling is that one of the solutions Harris proposes to Black crime is an increase in police presence. This is not an issue that can be effectively solved by more policing. Greater police presence will only increase violence, put more Black people in jail, and break up more Black families (already a predictor of intergenerational poverty and participation in crime). This suggests a profound ignorance on Harris's part about the underlying issues faced by Black communities. The overrepresentation of Black people in crime, which Harris dismisses as nothing at all, is a result of deeply rooted and persistent systemic racism. Police cannot solve those problems. In fact police will likely make them worse.

Harris dismisses without evidence the use by activists of individual videos of anti-Black police brutality as not being sufficient evidence of a systemic problem (on the face of it, that's a valid criticism). His counterpoint, however, is to use individual videos of white people being murdered by police. He can't criticize a method of argumentation, and then later make a point using that same argumentative technique. In both cases, an anecdote (and a single video of a police murdering someone is an anecdote) isn't evidence of a systemic problem. But unlike Harris who is actually using anecdotes to make a systemic point, activists, BLM folks, Black folks, academics, and a lot of other people are not relying on anecdotes to support an argument of a systemic problem.

Harris cites plenty of statistics that show just how profoundly marginalized Black people, and POC in general, are. His statistics on median net worth ($17,000 for Black families, $170,000 for white families) and the persistence of those inequalities at in the top 10% of earners clearly demonstrates that Black families are systematically disadvantaged.

That systematic, obviously race-based (economic) disadvantage is inextricable from the issue of Black crime. In general, crime (other than white-collar crime, which is predominantly committed by wealthy white men) is a result of being marginalized, being excluded from mainstream society, and being unable to participate in the formal economy. When you have a racialized group like Black people who have on average a mere 10% of the wealth of whites, who are still segregated

in the education system, and who are routinely denied access to employment, you have a group that is extremely marginalized, despite what a rich white PhD with a podcast might think. Policing will not fix that because much of what the legal system has done is criminalize poverty, which is disproportionally experienced by Black and POC. Even no-knock raids… other than the extremely rare occasion when a no-knock raid is being done to root out a white collar political criminal like Roger Stone, these are almost always going to be taking place in lower income, largely non-white neighbourhoods. An error in police judgement – which is the dismissive way that Harris explains why Breonna Taylor was murdered – will inevitably disproportionally affect Black communities.

And one last point. Harris says that we only have two options: conversation, and violence,

and that the protests signify a lack of willingness on the part of protesters to engage in conversation. It is obvious, then, that Harris hasn't bothered to listen to the generations of Black people who have been trying to have this conversation, and who have not been listened to for decades. Harris is racist in suggesting that the protesters are the ones who are the problem. That sentiment is a recapitulation of the racist trope of Black people being uppity and unreasonable. These protests are happening because the many attempts by Black folks to have this conversation have been shut down and ignored for centuries by white people who continue to be unwilling to listen to Black voices. This episode of Harris's podcast continues the racist legacy of Black voices falling on deaf white ears.

Harris is an arrogant, racist ass who needs to shut up. If we spent the money on social programs that we spend on policing, society would look dramatically different.