

Police Brutality in America

In recent years in America, the men and women of our police force have been under strict surveillance due to several situations that have brought police brutality into debate yet again. Two prime examples include murders of innocent African American males Trayvon Martin and Scott Dubose – both were gunned down by police officers. Don Jackson a former police chief in Hawthorne, California states, “Excessive police force against blacks has always been tolerated. Investigations will not make a difference. The investigators support police and more importantly they support the racist mentality that is responsible for most of the brutality.” (Burris, 72). Allegations of police abuse are rife in cities across the country and take many forms. For us to believe that police officers who abuse their authority do not exist would be naïve and oblivious. When police officers are sworn into duty, they are taking it upon themselves to protect and serve their sovereign state in hopes of instilling peace throughout his or her assigned community. Often times, this can mean making snap decisions that could result in life or death. These job requirements drive many to believe that these are some of the bravest men and women in our country. While this may be true, it has become increasingly more prevalent that bad apples exist in every bunch.

In recent years a portion of law enforcement officials have acted against what they were sworn in to do, and as a result there have been a high number of circumstances, often times leaving horrific results, where the people who are supposed to be protected become innocent victims. Obviously it doesn’t take much attention to realize there is reason for concern, the question of how to solve this problem remains without a solution. Consequently, without officers of the law being held accountable consistently, acts of violence by police officers and civil disobedience by citizens will remain persistent until government officials can provide more clarity on brutality cases.

The increase in police violence is part of a toughened criminal justice system, which includes the war on drugs, the building of new prisons, and the garnering of federal habeas corpus rights. (Kerstetter, 1985) The rise in police brutality may come from a quick criminalization of people because the public wants safer streets and immediate action by police. This demand stems from public concern that accumulates from much of what the media portrays. With pressure building on police officers to deal with criminals, juveniles, violence, and other public problems it becomes easier to believe that an overburdened police officer might resort to initial violence to save time instead of making arrests and filling out paper work.

An incident in the New York subway dating back to 1998, illustrates what police officers have been doing to suspicious but also innocent citizens. In July 1998 a young woman, Lani Soto, was riding the New York subway at 11:00pm (Herbert, 1999). Lani had just left work and was on her way to Williamsburg where she lived when she was approached by one of two police officers while waiting for her train to stop. The officer started asking her questions when one of them told her to stand up, she said no and the officer grabbed her by the hair and pushed her face into the train door. The officer then claimed to be frisking her. Instead of doing a routine frisk the officer put his hand in between her legs and then on her breasts. All of this was done, longer than necessary, to evaluate whether or not she was in fact carrying a weapon. When the train came to a stop and the doors opened, the young woman

darted off the train where the police officers remained laughing at her. Another example of police abusing their power can be seen in the case of Shawn Robbins, a 30-year-old associate director for CBS Sports (Houppert, 1999), was on his way to the gym on November 20, 1997 when he noticed a man cleaning out his car by tossing trash onto the street. The sight and smell of garbage being thrown on the street became so overwhelming that Robbins felt the need to say something. He simply mentioned to the man that there was a trash can on every block in the city, so why was he putting trash on the street? The man replied, "If you want to pick it up, you fucking pick it up!" Robbins picked up an empty coffee cup and placed on the back of an off duty police officers car. At that point, the officer proceeded to arrest him for no reason at all. Officer Brian Moran threatened to pull out his gun and put a bullet into Robbins' head. Robbins was taken to the 17th precinct and charged with disorderly conduct. After being held for several hours, Mr. Robbins was released (DeSantis, 1994 p.4) It's not uncommon for police officers to ask questions or pat someone down if suspicious behavior is expected or has been reported. However, to abuse the power invested in you to initiate sexual harassment or to prove your superiority is unacceptable (Houppert, 1999 p.40). Situations like this occur because these officers carry a badge and gun, which empowers them to believe that they are somehow above the law. Regardless of the abuse of power, these actions typically derive from the same motive.

Police throughout the U.S. must be made more accountable for their actions through an innovative and effective monitoring system. National, state, and local police authorities have an obligation to ensure communities that exhibiting brutality and excessive force will not be tolerated. Wayne Kerstetter, (1985), has identified different types of citizen's complaint and review boards. Unfortunately, these boards are made up of non-police personnel and are an independent form of police departments (Kerstetter, 1985 p.160). All in all, these organizations have zero authority to take any action having to do with police altercations. Any disciplinary action currently lies in the hands of the police force itself, and with the cohesiveness this profession carries, we can anticipate a stagnant process of prosecution as corrupt police officers run wild. Police and public officials greet each new report of brutality with denials or explanations that the act was an aberration, while the administrative and criminal systems that should deter these abuses by holding officers accountable instead virtually guarantee them impunity (Williams, p.45).

As a solution for this problem, I would like to implement the police worn body camera as an attempt to put an end to police brutality. As stated above, there have been far too many controversial incidents involving the criminal justice department in our country. For example, if the young woman who was assaulted in the story above decided she wanted to pursue justice against the two officers, there would not be any substantial evidence in her favor, and thus it would be her word against the words of government officials. How are we supposed to feel safe in our respective communities, if the very people who are supposed to protect us continue to put our trust in jeopardy? Today, everyone can be a reporter via cell phone cameras, tablet cameras, etc. The body worn camera has been known to show significant influence in lowering the amount of officers who step out of their lines of duty, is objective and unbiased, and holds both citizens and officers accountable if they are to act in or provoke an illegal/unethical activity. The different reasons why body cameras are shown to be useful are: First, they can be used for evidence. The perpetrator won't be able to shift blame towards police officers because of the camera surveillance. Second, body cameras would instill a certain fear in people acting in unlawful ways or at least deter them from escalating the situation. Third, once again police officers would be obligated to always play by the rules. There is a serious argument to make about invading the

privacy of the public with these cameras, but I believe installing body worn cameras would have an immediate upside in violent police officer altercations.

Citizens, partly by influence of culture, media, and previous experiences may see police officers as an enemy or as someone who is there to oppress them in some way. Many Americans can tell stories about bad encounters with police officers. Law enforcement officials must remember that they do not have the right to infringe upon citizens' civil liberties. No one deserves to be violated or be a victim at the hand of police brutality mentally or physically. Unfortunately, the world we live in is imperfect and until something changes in the justice system pertaining to their own employees, situations regarding police brutality will continue to happen.

References

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