

Issue and solutions of racial prejudice in police communities



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Some Six Feet Too Low, Others Six Feet Too High

“ Recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world.” The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) is the first document to universally outline and explain the basic human rights every single individual has, and that no one can take away from them, reinforced internationally by the United Nations (UN). The UN is an organisation that supplies worldwide aid and enforces peace, fulfilling the main roles of maintaining international peace and security, the protection of human rights, the suppliance of humanitarian aid, the promotion of sustainable development and the upholding of international law. Articles Two and Seven deal exclusively with discrimination and exclusion under law or the personal eye. Every single individual, regardless of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinions, national or social origin, property, birth or another status, as stated by Article Two of the UDHR, is entitled to all the rights and freedoms listed in the UDHR. Yet stands the issue of discrimination under the law, Article Seven clearly outlines that all are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of any previous declarations. In America, our country, first world, the land of the free, but not all are truly free, in the case of many racial minorities, either subconscious or blatant racism keeps them from being free and not discriminated against, creating racial prejudice in many communities, as well as police communities. This racial prejudice in police communities ends with atrocities, putting innocent people in jail and keeping guilty people out, putting innocent people six feet under, and murderers six feet too high.

In December 2014 President Barack Obama issued an executive order creating the Task Force on 21st Century Policing—a special commission of law enforcement officers, legal scholars, civil rights attorneys, and youth leaders. The task force was charged with making recommendations to America’s state and local law enforcement agencies in order to “strengthen trust among law enforcement officers and the communities they serve,” according to a White House press statement announcing its formation. The White House announcement also referenced “recent events in Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and around the country” as reasons for why this executive order was necessary. These “recent events” referred to by the White House were a series of incidents in 2014 that drew widespread attention, sparked a nationwide debate over police use of force, and led many Americans to question the level of trust they had in their local police.

In Ferguson (a suburb of St. Louis, Missouri), Michael Brown, a teenager, was shot multiple times by a police officer and left for dead in the middle of a city street. In Staten Island in New York City, forty-three-year-old Eric Garner was choked to death by a police officer in the course of being arrested by a group of police for illegally selling cigarettes. In Cleveland, Ohio, Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old boy who was playing in a park with a toy gun, was fatally shot by a police officer responding to a dispatch call. None of the three victims was armed. Their untimely deaths because of police action created much public outcry, including protests and civil rights demonstrations. There were several reasons why these three incidents sparked social unrest. One reason is the question of whether racial discrimination played a part in the deaths. In all three incidents, the victims were African American males, and

the police officers who killed them were white. Some people asserted that these and similar incidents were simply extreme examples of how racial minorities have been abused by the police.

The human rights group Amnesty International investigated police use of lethal force in a June 2015 report and concluded that “ the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and countless others across the United States has highlighted a widespread pattern of racially discriminatory treatment by law enforcement officers and an alarming use of lethal force nationwide.” Both established civil rights groups like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and new ones such as Black Lives Matter have sought to address concerns about police abuses against black men and women. Another reason why these incidents sparked nationwide concern is the police officers involved appeared to avoid any significant consequence for their actions. All three officers involved in the Brown, Garner, Rice killings were investigated by grand juries; all emerged unindicted and were thus relieved of being put on trial for their actions. Critics have argued that these cases are typical in that most police incidents of wrongful homicide or excessive use of force go unpunished. “ There’s shockingly little accountability for police and other law enforcement.... Indictments for police homicides are rare, and convictions almost nonexistent,” writes journalist Jamelle Bouie.

Changing hiring practices is one typical reform measure. For example, Victor Hwang, a member of the San Francisco Police Commission, has called for his city to “ revise its policies to encourage the hiring of officers who come from and live in the communities they serve.” Hwang and others argue that police

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officers as a group should be more representative of the places they patrol. If communities are racially and ethnically diverse, then police forces should reflect that diversity in hopes that systemic prejudices on the part of police forces will be neutralized and incidents of police brutality reduced. Katherine Spillar, executive director of the Feminist Majority Foundation, offers another simple hiring suggestion to prevent police brutality: Recruit more female police officers. She points to studies made over the past forty years that consistently demonstrate that female police officers are far less likely to be involved in excessive force or police shooting incidents or be named in civilian complaints than their male counterparts. One reason, many believe, is that women officers tend to rely more on communication than on physical force when dealing with people and may be better at defusing potentially violent confrontations before they turn deadly. A commission interviewed Los Angeles police officers to examine problems following the notorious police beating of Rodney King in 1991; they reported that “ many officers, both male and female, believe female officers are less personally challenged by defiant suspects and feel less need to deal with defiance with immediate force or confrontational language.” Currently, females constitute between 12 per cent and 18 percent of police officers, and many smaller police departments have very few female officers (and even fewer female commanders). Spillar argues that these numbers could improve by changing how police departments recruit job applicants. “ Too many police recruiting campaigns feature slick brochures and billboards focused on adrenaline-fueled car chases, SWAT incidents and helicopter rescues-the kind of policing featured in television dramas and that overwhelmingly appeals to male recruits,” she asserts. Such appeals may attract recruits (again, mostly men)

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who revel in action and displays of power-and may indirectly contribute to the problem of police brutality. Spillar says that recruiting should instead stress the reality that most day-to-day police work involves service-related activities and nonviolent interactions. In other words, “ the kind of policing that appeals to women,” Spillar claims.

Once people are recruited and hired, they need to be trained, both in police academies and later on the job. Many alternative ideas for combating police brutality and abuse focus on police training and what kind of norms and expectations of police are being taught. Criminal justice professor Maria Haberfeld argues that police officers in America are simply not getting enough training. “ An average training in the United States is fifteen weeks,” she says. “ Fifteen weeks is nothing.” She notes that police in other developed nations typically receive two or three times the amount of training that American police recruits do. And while some police departments provide continuing in-service training for police officers, the majority of police departments do not offer it, usually due to budget constraints. The result, she suggests, is an undereducated, undertrained police force that may be more prone to rely on shooting or using force when dealing with difficult situations or people. Haberfeld and other critics see shortcomings not only in the amount of training police receive but in the police academy curriculum. Police training (both in-service and at academies) resembles military boot camps and often focuses on personal safety, firearms, combat techniques, and using physical force to subdue subjects. To Haberfeld and others, less-combative skills are neglected. Journalist Patrik Jonsson writes that, for example, “ US police cadets spend an average of 58 hours at the gun range

and eight hours learning how to de-escalate tense situations.” Critics argue that police need more training on how to communicate and interact with people, how to avoid or de-escalate confrontations, and how police actions (such as use of force) may impact the department’s and officer’s relationship with the community. “ The majority of police officers are overwhelmingly trained with a focus on the technical part of use of force, and are not trained enough in the emotional, psychological, physiological aspects of use of force,” says Haberfeld.

The soldier’s mission is that of a warrior: to conquer. The rules of engagement are decided before the battle. The police officer’s mission is that of a guardian: to protect. The rules of engagement evolve as the incident unfolds. Soldiers must follow orders. Police officers must make independent decisions. Soldiers come into communities as an outside, occupying force. Guardians are members of the community, protecting from within. Police have jobs within the community, black or white, no matter the situation, they have a duty to protect. Acting with personal discrimination rather than judicial discrimination has only ended in the pointless killing and murder of innocent people. Police acting on racial bias can be stopped very easily, yet everyone who has tried has failed. Do people not want racism to end? Or are people content with the pointless killing of innocent people on American soil in your neighborhoods and on your sidewalks and streets just because they’re a different colour than you? It needs to stop, yet it hasn’t. Yet.

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