

Corruption Within the Police Force

By

Carolina Salame

ABSTRACT. This article discusses corruption and unethical behaviors that have occurred within the police force, in order to demonstrate the importance of systemic changes for policing. The text explores several instances of police brutality linked with racial profiling, such as those of victims Eric Garner and Oscar Grant. The author also depicts police officers who have been found with direct ties to hate groups or white supremacist groups in order to demonstrate that cops contribute to systemic racism that hinders unity and equality. The text also analyzes police privilege and power, showing that due to an absence of a higher authority, immoral actions and corruption continue to exist unchecked. These conflicts are resolved through internal investigation, which often leads to the police officer's colleagues using their privilege to aid each other and escape consequences. The author also talks about larger implications, such as a lack of proper police training, as seen in the mass shootings in Las Vegas and at Stoneman Douglas High School. Further instances of corruption, such as police negligence, can also lead to the deaths of bystanders and innocent civilians. This article attempts to shed light on the systemic issues that contaminate and dismantle the credibility and trust that police departments should have. The author provides solutions, such as more thorough screening processes and establishing a higher authority to audit police officers, to make an effort to alleviate some of these social tensions.

INTRODUCTION

Police brutality and abuse of power is a sociological phenomenon that does not go unnoticed by both the media and by civilians all over the nation (ACLU n.d.). What goes overlooked is just how deep the depths of police corruption are, from police brutality to unchecked power and consequences of the actions of law enforcement. This topic is incredibly relevant to today's society because our governing system is marketed as a protective body for the people. However, it is causing a great amount of harm and damage, especially to minority groups. The extent of the harm caused by police forces sheds light on the effects of racism, greed, and toxicity on society by those who are meant to protect. This work contributes to the literature on policing by collecting and organizing a broad array of data that can then be used to further build upon or provide law enforcement with the proper tools to adjust and fix their programs.

Police corruption has come to light in recent years through police brutality and body camera footage. Despite the extensive history of police violence, specifically geared towards black communities, such as with Rodney King and John Smith, the Black Lives Matter¹ movement was revamped in 2012 with the case of Trayvon Martin². Body camera footage was implemented to instill accountability for misbehavior such as planting drugs and mistreating civilians. The Lab in Washington, D.C. ran a study to test if body cameras lowered crime, however, they found that the change was so minimal that it was statistically insignificant (Yokum, Ravishankar, and Coppock 2017). If the police show no changed behavior while being watched, one can only imagine their behavior in areas where they are not being watched. Body cameras were implemented by the state, which means there is a government awareness of corruption within the police force. This proves that the government knows and still sides with them, therefore it is up to the civilians themselves to demand justice and hold the systems in power accountable for the actions of the governing bodies. Corruption goes beyond an individual scale and has seeped into a departmental scale causing systemic problems, as it is deeply rooted in our law enforcement systems and stems from police privilege, racial profiling, and unchecked power. Correcting the system will prevent future incidents and create a more trustworthy and comforting reputation for the department.

Police Brutality

Racial profiling is a byproduct of the uncontrollable power that the police hold. There is strong evidence that mass incarceration is the modern-day slavery. Although black people make up only about 13% of the United States population, they make up about 34% of the prison population. This means that African Americans are incarcerated at five times the rate of their white counterparts and 1 in 3 black men can expect to go to jail in their lifetime (NAACP n.d.; Porter 2018). According to the article “White Power, Black Crime, and Racial Politics” written by Robert Staples (2011:33), 43% of those executed since 1976 and 55% of the people who are waiting to be executed are people of color. The numbers are clear and prove that not only does racial profiling go beyond mere stereotyping, it causes deep physical and psychological harm to marginalized communities.

Two prominent examples of police brutality are the murders of Eric Garner and Oscar Grant. Eric Garner was unarmed and killed by Officer Daniel Pantaleo in 2014 for selling cigarettes. The officer at fault was not indicted, despite his illegal use of a chokehold to kill Garner. This case went viral and Garner’s famous last words, “I can’t breathe,” were used to fuel the Black Lives Matter movement. Oscar Grant was coming home from a New Year’s Eve party in 2009 when he got apprehended at an Oakland Bart station. Despite being in handcuffs and forcibly laid face down, Officer Johannes Mehserle

¹ The Black Lives Matter movement was inspired by the earlier Black Panther movement from the 1960’s and 1970’s.

² Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, was found not guilty on all charges because he claimed self-defense via Florida’s stand your ground law. He later auctioned off the gun used in this killing for \$250,000 and as of December 4, 2019 he is suing Trayvon Martin’s family for \$100 million.

placed his knee into Grant's back and shot him. The officer claimed it was an accident and he meant to taser him, but with witness testimony and video evidence, he received a two year jail sentence of which he served 11 months of. As a result, riots erupted and a film was released about Oscar Grant's story in 2013 (Scott 2013). Stories like this are all too common. Other high-profile police brutality cases include Freddie Gray, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Sandra Bland.³ It is important to mention that in many of these murders committed by police, the police are often found not guilty as can be seen in the case of Trayvon Martin (Botelho 2013).

Police brutality is not the end of racism in police departments. There are several cases of police officers having direct ties to hate groups or white supremacist groups. In 2017, an officer faced scrutiny after appearing in court in Washington D.C. wearing a shirt with a white supremacist symbol (Johnson 2017).⁴ Furthermore, three police officers in Florida were discovered to be members of a local Ku Klux Klan chapter. They were caught after trying to recruit other officers. In Alabama, a lieutenant was fired for being a part of the League of the South in 2015. Stories like this are very common which is highly concerning. Those who we are supposed to trust to protect society often become complacent in the power structures that benefit them and harm others, therefore causing them to act and navigate their positions in very prejudiced and hateful ways. Recently, it was found that border patrol agents were engaging in a Facebook group where they posted racist, offensive, and obscene imagery against women and immigrants (Lopez 2019). Hate crimes are on the rise and police are clearly no exception to this. Cops are supposed to be the protectors of society, yet evidence shows they contribute to this systemic racism that hinders unity and equality in the United States.

Police Privilege and Power

According to "Don't Elect Me': Sheriffs and the Need for Reform in County Law Enforcement" written by James Tomberlin (2018), ranks within the police department are not always efficient. There are some positions within law enforcement offices that are elected, such as sheriffs. This is highly problematic because of reasons such as: low voter turnout, the difficulty to monitor the ongoing actions of officers, and in rural areas, the subordinate is most likely to replace a sitting sheriff, which would mean going up against their boss. Incumbents are more than likely to get reelected to their position, which is why the average term for a sheriff is twenty-four years. Tomberlin also talks about how when a sheriff was asked how people could hold him accountable for his and the department's actions, the sheriff responded, "don't elect me" (Tomberlin 2018:143). This shows that there is confidence from the police's side that nothing will be done to put their power in check.

³ Due to lack of intersectionality, only one of those names listed is a black woman. Cases of structural violence against black men get sensationalized more than stories of women, but that is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ The shirt depicts the grim reaper holding a police badge and rifle with the controversial phrase "let me see that waistband jo". The article further explores police ties to white supremacy.

Another example of unchecked power is when law enforcement misbehaves, there is no governing body above them, so their actions can only be reported back to that same department. Conflicts arise through internal investigations because colleagues survey and investigate each other. Furthermore, if a cop does something illegal at home, like beat a wife, the people who respond to the call are his⁵ friends. This is a serious problem because according to the National Center for Women and Policing, "...at least 40% of police families experience domestic violence, in contrast to 10% of families in the general population" (National Center For Women and Policing n.d.). Realistically, this number is probably larger because of the fear of reporting. Police departments with abusers working in the system will not function properly because they will likely side with other abusers whom they come into contact with. Colleagues who cover up situations like these contaminate and dismantle the caring and supporting nature police departments should have. This can also lead to becoming more comfortable getting involved in further cover-ups, scandals, and unethical behaviors. The article also says that victims of police abuse are especially vulnerable because their abusers know where the shelters are, they know how to manipulate the system, and they have a gun (National Center For Women and Policing n.d.). For those officers who do get caught, they face little to no consequence. The article found that the minority population of officers who got punished simply got sent to counseling, and more than half kept their jobs, with about 19% of departments saying they would terminate after a second offense (National Center For Women and Policing n.d.). Although you cannot be a police officer if you have any charges, police can get away with these actions because some laws do not apply to them and they have the power to bend the rules, despite the immorality of that.

Larger Implications and Incidents

Police corruption weakens our society not just on a large scale, but on an individualistic basis as well. Cops are making highly questionable choices as it is, but the following examples show a severe lack of proper training. At the Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, there was a mass shooting on February 14, 2018, killing 17 individuals and injuring 17 as well (Burch and Blinder 2019). Although there was a police officer on campus, Scot Peterson, he did not enter the building during the shooting. This called for outrage from the community and survivors because he could have saved lives by apprehending the shooter. He retreated to safety and radio dispatched for help. He was suspended without pay, chose to retire, and eventually got arrested⁶ for his actions. Captain Jan Jordan was also criticized for failing to confront the shooter in an active matter as protocol states, and instead had deputies line the perimeter (DeMarzo and Nehamas 2018). The shooting in Parkland is a prime example of the police system failing to protect citizens.

⁵ I used male pronouns because the overwhelming majority of cops are male, and the majority of abusers are male. However, I recognize that abuse can happen by anyone and to anyone.

⁶ He was charged with 11 counts of child neglect, culpable negligence, and perjury. As of December 11, 2019, there has been no trial date set.

Similar to Parkland, the mass shooting in Las Vegas the night of October 1, 2017 was also mishandled. Somehow, the shooter managed to walk into a hotel with several guns on his person a few days before the shooting and took the time to set up. He deceived security and room service and succeeded in killing 59 people and injuring 869 more. Not only did 9-1-1 receive multiple phone calls about gunfire, but the police officers on scene hesitated to approach the attacker's hotel room out of fear. There was also a witness who claimed a woman told people they were "all going to die" before the concert started (Lockie 2017). Furthermore, one shooter was somehow able to unload over 1000 rounds of ammunition into the crowd, despite his old age (64 years old) and physical and time constraints. Despite all of this, police ruled this event as being a solo act, and it is thought to be one of the deadliest single shooter attacks in all of American history.

A recent story is the death of Frank Ordonez, the UPS driver whose truck got hijacked by robbers attempting to steal jewels. The driver was 27 years old and was on his first day on a new route. The cops were led on a 30-mile chase which would usually result in a jurisdiction change, but that did not happen here. Furthermore, instead of attempting to send a negotiator or set up roadblocks, over 18 police officers fired their guns in a trigger-happy gunfight that resulted in the deaths of both the suspected robbers, the UPS driver, and a nearby innocent civilian. The cops used their vehicles and civilian vehicles during rush hour to hide behind and shoot from several angles, which put many lives at stake and broke police protocol. Lives could have been saved if the police were not so negligent. Ordonez leaves behind a loving family, including a wife and two children (Iati 2019).

A comprehensive example of police corruption, gang activity, and drug involvement is the Los Angeles Police Department's 1998 Rampart Scandal. The Los Angeles Police Department attempted to form an anti-gang unit, but the group became so toxic and corrupt that it soon fell apart. Over 70 police officers were implicated in this scandal which included road rage, shootings, bank robberies, drug dealing, missing drugs, planting evidence, perjury, assault, and crime cover ups. Police officer Rafael Pérez was the one who broke the news and told on his colleagues. Only 24 officers were found to be in the wrong but 12 were suspended, seven left on their own accord, and the remaining five were terminated. Over 100 individuals had their cases overturned after this scandal and over 140 lawsuits were filed against the city of Los Angeles (Kaplan 2009; PBS n.d.). This scandal was so broad and affected so many people that there are many cases still open or unsolved as a result. This group was so corrupt that innocent people were hurt, killed, or affected, leaving a lasting stain on the Los Angeles Police Department's reputation.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Police departments were formed to protect civilians, but it seems as though they often do more harm than good. Officers need a more thorough screening and constant checks to make sure they are remaining honest and with good intentions. Furthermore,

there needs to be a separate system that police have to report to, removing the need for internal investigations. By implementing a more rigorous reporting system, less crimes will be covered up by colleagues and victims will be more comfortable filing reports. Any officer who has an offense or domestic abuse call should be immediately terminated and have all weapons removed from their possession. Lastly, sensitivity training needs to be reformed and officers should be required to undergo extensive education and over 1000 or so hours of training to properly assess situations and wield weapons. It is immoral to allow this corruption to continue, and if it does, people will no longer have faith in those who should be the epitome of trust and of commitment to public safety. Innocent people are dying as a result of this neglect and serious considerations need to be taken to revise all departments across the United States.

REFERENCES

- ACLU (American Civil Liberties Union). n.d. "ACLU News & Commentary." *American Civil Liberties Union*. Retrieved March 16, 2020 (<https://www.aclu.org/news/by-issue/police-corruption/>).
- NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People). n.d. "Criminal Justice Fact Sheet." *NAACP*. Retrieved February 29, 2020 (<https://www.naacp.org/criminal-justice-fact-sheet/>).
- National Center For Women and Policing. n.d. "Police Family Violence Fact Sheet." *National Center For Women and Policing*. Retrieved March 15, 2020 (<http://womenandpolicing.com/violencefs.asp>).
- PBS (Public Broadcasting Service). n.d. "Scandal | PBS - L.a.p.d. Blues | FRONTLINE." *PBS*. Retrieved March 16, 2020 (<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/lapd/scandal/>).
- Botelho, Greg and Holly Yan. 2013. "George Zimmerman Found Not Guilty of Murder in Trayvon Martin's Death." *CNN*. Retrieved February 29, 2020 (<https://www.cnn.com/2013/07/13/justice/zimmerman-trial/index.html>).
- Burch, Audra D. S. and Alan Blinder. 2019. "Parkland Officer Who Stayed Outside During Shooting Faces Criminal Charges." *The New York Times*. Retrieved February 29, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/us/parkland-scot-peterson.html>).
- DeMarzo, Wanda J. and Nicholas Nehamas. 2018. "Deputies Were Told to Set up 'Perimeter' around Parkland Shooting. That's Not the Training." *Miamiherald*. Retrieved February 29, 2020 (<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/community/broward/article203015289.html>).
- Iati, Marisa. 2019. "A UPS Driver Was Working a New Route When He Was Taken Hostage and Killed in a Chaotic Police Shootout." *The Washington Post*. Retrieved (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2019/12/06/ups-driver-frank-ordonez-killed-florida-shootout/>).

- Johnson, Vida B. 2017. "The Epidemic of White Supremacist Police." *The Appeal*. Retrieved March 19, 2020 (<https://theappeal.org/the-epidemic-of-white-supremacist-police-4992cb7ad97a/>).
- Kaplan, Paul J. 2009. "Looking Through the Gaps: A Critical Approach to the LAPD's Rampart Scandal." *Social Justice* 36(1):61–81.
- Lockie, Alex. 2017. "Witness Says Woman Told Las Vegas Crowd They're 'All Going to Die' 45 Minutes before Shooting." *Business Insider*. Retrieved (<https://www.businessinsider.com/las-vegas-shooting-crowd-witness-stephen-pad-dock-2017-10>).
- Lopez, German. 2019. "In a Private Facebook Group, Border Patrol Agents Reportedly Joked about Dead Migrants." *Vox*. Retrieved March 16, 2020 (<https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2019/7/2/20678839/border-patrol-facebook-group-posts-racist-sexist>).
- Porter, Nicole D. 2018. "Report to the United Nations on Racial Disparities in the U.S. Criminal Justice System." *The Sentencing Project*. Retrieved March 16, 2020 (<https://www.sentencingproject.org/publications/un-report-on-racial-disparities/>).
- Scott, A. O. 2013. "A New Year, and a Last Day Alive." *The New York Times*. Retrieved March 19, 2020 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/12/movies/fruitvale-station-is-based-on-the-story-of-oscar-grant-iii.html>).
- Staples, Robert. 2011. "White Power, Black Crime, and Racial Politics." *The Black Scholar* 41(4):31–41.
- Tomberlin, James. 2018. "'Don't Elect Me': Sheriffs and the Need For Reform in County Law Enforcement." *Virginia Law Review Association* 104(113):114–57.
- Yokum, David, Anita Ravishankar, and Alexander Coppock. 2017. *Evaluating the Effects of Police Body-Worn Cameras: A Randomized Controlled Trial*. Washington D.C.: The Lab @ DC. Retrieved (https://bwc.thelab.dc.gov/TheLabDC_MPD_BWC_Working_Paper_10.20.17.pdf).