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Can Community Policing Eradicate Racism in American Police Departments?

Kim MacInnis

On February 26, 2012, seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin was shot and killed by George Zimmerman, a white man, as the youth passed through Zimmerman's gated community. Media reports suggested that Zimmerman followed an unarmed Martin and instigated a physical altercation that ended in Zimmerman shooting Martin to death (Smith and Merolla 2019). Upon investigation, it was discovered that Zimmerman (a member of the neighborhood watch) had routinely called the police on young Black males when seen in his community. Zimmerman was criminally charged with Trayvon Martin's death but was acquitted. One year later, in 2013, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson, Missouri police officer, Darren Wilson. Brown was unarmed and had been approached by Wilson for jaywalking. Wilson faced criminal charges for the shooting but was acquitted.

Numerous other Black males killed by police officers, such as Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, highlight the reality of police violence against Black males. The death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of a Minneapolis police officer, rose to the height of public consciousness in America because it was witnessed by many bystanders and filmed. The repeated replay of Floyd's death on news outlets generated a symbol of the crisis in police relations with Black communities.

On March 15, 2020, Breonna Taylor was killed by police in Louisville,

Kentucky. The police were conducting a no-knock warrant for her ex-boyfriend. Her then-boyfriend fired a shot from his gun and the police fired 32 shots, hitting Breonna six times. No charges were levied against the officers except for a wanton endangerment charge against one officer (Martin 2021). Taylor's death by police brought attention to an often-forgotten subset of people of color shot by police: women. A similar case involved twenty-one-year-old Alteria Woods from Florida who was killed on March 19, 2017. Woods was caught in the crossfire between the police and her boyfriend. She was shot 10 times.

As of December 2021, 117 Black civilians have been killed by the police in the United States (statistica.com). This statistic is grim, given that the Black population comprises only 13 percent of Americans. African Americans are more likely than any other ethnic group to get shot by the police. Since 2015, there have been 38 fatal shootings per million for the Black population compared to 15 fatal shootings per million for white people. Black people are pulled over more, arrested at higher rates for drug infractions, and more likely to be imprisoned with longer sentences (Hetey and Eberhardt 2018). One explanation given by sociologists regarding this disproportion is "ecological fallacy," where people act with generalizations in mind. Perceived criminality of the Black population by society may explain much of the racialized police violence in the United States. The statistics tell us this is not happenstance. It is systemic racism.

It should therefore come as no surprise that relations between law enforcement and African American communities are contentious. One solution often touted by political and community leaders to ease that tension is community policing. As described by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, community policing is a collaboration between the police and the community that identifies community problems. The community members become active participants in problem solving and police officers become allies. Despite the lack of strong empirical evidence that community policing will solve racial tensions between the police and populations of color, some form of community relation policies or philosophy are consistently voiced as remedies to this serious issue. It's a fair assumption that law and order should represent the cornerstone of democracy and the police are the most visible representation of this ideal. Because of the power imbalance between the police and

civilians, democracy may be out of reach, but not impossible. In order to have a conversation about community policing, one must understand and acknowledge that the historical treatment of people of color by the police heavily influences treatment today.

The social and historical context of police and community conflict requires examination. The police as a modern institution developed in London under the tutelage of Sir Robert Peel in 1829 (Winright 2020). Peel advocated for a gentler approach in maintaining social order by dismantling militarism and promoting persuasive strategies by police officers. However, this image of the “Bobby” happily interacting with communities is misleading. London police were established to ensure imperial order and expand capitalism. The police were not acting for the people, but to control the people (Seigel 2017).



Image 1: (Pexels.com).

institution of policing that Americans inherited from the British founders of urban policing was a *colonial* power.

history, as they mimicked a paramilitary style of policing already embedded in Ireland. Colonial forces were concerned with crime control but most of the focus was on controlling the masses (lower-class and of color) and protecting the power of the colonial state (Bell 2013). Police culture, developed mainly from a military type of style, became deeply entrenched in Britain and penal practices were harsh (Bell 2013).

The London model of policing was transplanted to the United States in 1845, first in New York. At this time, the police still worked without firearms, but carried sticks. This changed after the Civil War when police forces began to arm their officers and the United States adopted military style policing. For the police, among other functions, guns were key instruments used to control people of color, particularly slaves. As in London, there was a direct connection between capitalism and inequality, and the police were the agents assigned to control servitude and ensure exploitation (Winright 2020). For American police forces, the problem population was defined principally by race, not class. White supremacy was fundamental to American society and

Congress ordered the Justice Department to document how often police officers killed unarmed citizens. No data was collected or published. . . . Even the FBI failed to document killings by police in some of the most populous states and excluded all data on killings by federal agents.

The problem of systemic racism that plagues police-community relations in America today has deep historical roots that stem from the founding of those forces two centuries ago. The

British police officers subjugated the urban working classes and used the progressively more powerful tools of surveillance and violence to do so. This practice had long existed in British

partially maintained through policing. Today, it is no longer about enforcing slaveowners' "rights," but the need to control remains.

From their inception, police departments were comprised of predominantly white male officers, although the goal of incorporating Black officers in all police departments across the country was voiced as far back as the 1800s. However, the idea that hiring Black officers might change or eradicate tensions proved incorrect. White officers refused to partner with Black officers or form positive relations with Black citizens and could do so with no formal consequences until the mid-1960s (Kuykendall and Burns 1980). Forman (2018) addresses this tension and explains that one major goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to enlist Black police officers. The idea was to end discrimination in the police force and to protect the Black community. Neither of these goals were realized. Placing Black police officers in Black communities simply enabled continued segregation. In cities like Atlanta, Black officers were housed in different facilities than white police officers and had limited power over arresting white citizens (Forman 86). Simply adding people of color to police departments did nothing to combat entrenched perceptions of race and policing.

The first serious attempt at reconciling relations between the police and communities of color came with the enactment of the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 by the U.S. Congress. This act institutionalized community policing as a law enforcement technique to improve community relations. It cost taxpayers \$30 billion and was passed amid strong public concern about crime in the

nationwide for police patrols. The idea was to alleviate Americans' fear of alleged increases in violent crime as well as to form partnerships between police officers and their civilian districts (U.S. Department of Justice 2015). Just as adding Black officers to police departments across the country did not eradicate racism, adding 100,000 police officers nationwide changed nothing. If anything, there were more

cases of police brutality and racial profiling, given that new police officers were placed mainly in communities of color (Shannon 2019).

The bill also required the federal attorney general to gather data about the use of excessive force by law enforcement. Congress ordered the Justice Department to document how often police officers killed unarmed citizens (Bovard 2020). No data was collected or published. There was an attempt by the Justice Department to administer a survey regarding

force during police-civilian encounters, but this also failed. In 2001, the Justice Department issued a report stating that police were justified when lethal force was used. Even the FBI failed to document killings by police in some of the most populous states and excluded all data on killings by federal agents (Bovard 2020). Additionally, the Justice Department supported police officers every time an excessive-force case surfaced.

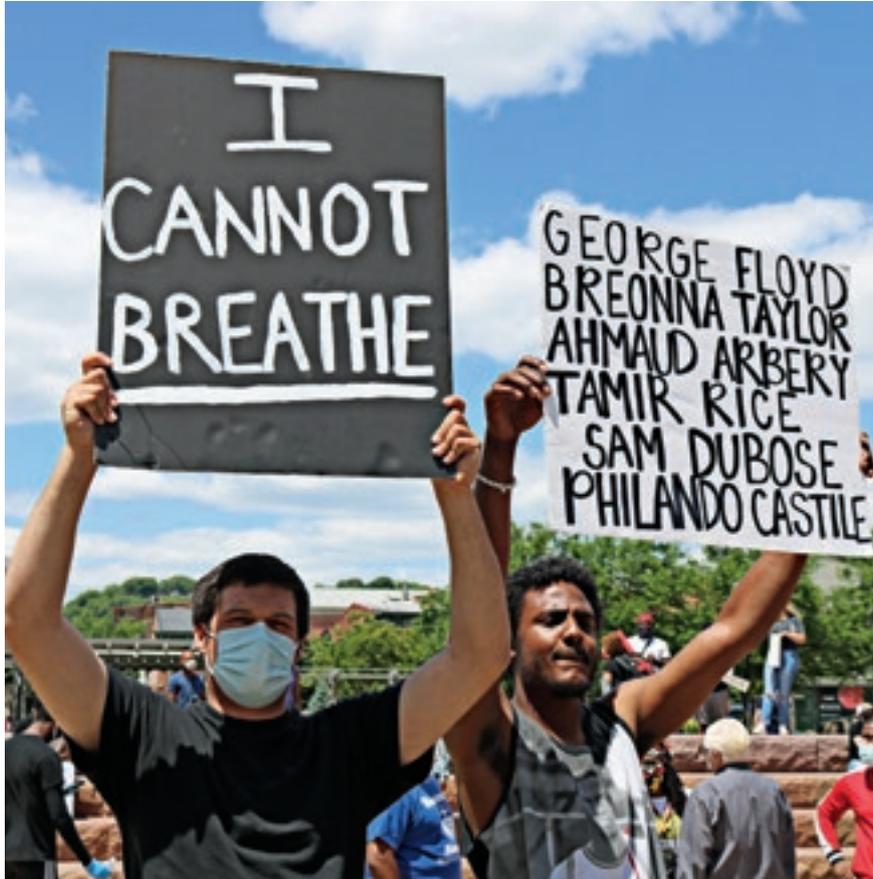


Image 2: (Photo Credit: Doris Pulliam/Pexels.com).

early 1990s. The largest portion of this funding went to community policing. The aim was to transform law enforcement beyond the problems that society and the police experienced in earlier eras, such as inefficiencies in dealing with crime, police misconduct, corruption, and poor police-minority relations (Brown 2021).

The bill created an \$8.8 billion program to add 100,000 police officers

How can community policing be effective with so many obstacles in place? The practice has always been premised on a theoretical construct, thus making its implementation abstract and difficult. A “one-size-fits-all” approach to community policing does not make sense given the diverse and unique communities across the United States. Putting more police officers on the street and engaging with communities in non-criminal matters guarantees nothing if racism persists. But, if we can agree with the general principle that living in a safe community means that police officers and civilians must be partners in that quest, the notion of community policing may well be achieved.

Since 2015, there have been 38 fatal shootings per million for the Black population compared to 15 fatal shootings per million for white people.

Crime and social disorder tend to be the focus of community policing. Its success depends in a large part on community engagement but also on police officers’ perception of communities they engage. If community members are involved in the initial stages of developing community policing, the hope is that they are more likely to want to continue developing healthy rapport with police officers. Involvement may entail neighborhood meetings, having residents sit on advisory boards or committees focused on producing safe communities. A study by Peyton et al. (2019) found that a single incident of positive nonenforcement contact between police officers and the public improved relations between police officers and civilians. Where

there is no trust or communication, stereotypical assumptions about the police and racial minorities will prevail, with potentially deadly costs.

Another major obstacle to repairing relations between predominantly minority communities and the police is the fact that the police have more power than civilians. Bonner (2014) points out that abuse of police power has resulted in unnecessary deaths and excessive force, leading to consistent questioning of the legitimacy and capability of the police maintaining social order. Power can be used in positive ways, and this needs to be apparent in reconstructing police procedure, perception of minorities, and community policing.

A successful community policing approach involves the deconstruction and destruction of foundational racist thought. Sociologist Karl Mannheim voiced these very sentiments regarding the power of dominant thought by stating, “thinking is never a privileged activity free from the effects of group life; therefore, it must be understood and interpreted within its construct” (Allan 2013). Mannheim stressed that all ideas, even “truths,” were related to, and hence influenced by, the social and historical situation from which they emerged. This form of ideology shapes many police departments across the United States and impedes the suggestion that diverse groups of people can work together to produce a healthy and safe community. Hence the solution

lies in the deconstruction of inherited institutional practice and thinking and equal participation in developing safe communities, healthy rapport with police officers, and the eventual eradication of discrimination. The solution is to decolonize the system.

“Knowledge” can change, and perceptions can be altered, but what is deemed meaningful must be shared between the police and diverse communities. One side cannot argue that the other side’s perception of crime, danger, or discrimination is wrong because these are perceptions that have been ingrained in their minds, witnessed by their eyes, and experienced by their physical beings – products of a deeply racist past. However, for that to change, both sides must deconstruct their perceptions of each other for the sole purpose of creating a new space where safe living and trusting relations are of paramount importance. Given the inevitable structural divide between police officers and civilians, it will be difficult to develop trust and hope for a healthy relationship between the police and communities of color.

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