

It Don't Take Much to Piss Off a Cop

A Commentary on Systemic Racism in Policing

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In 1991, I was a tenured, associate professor of psychology at Delaware State College during the height of the national discourse regarding the televised police attack on Rodney King. At that time, I was compelled to write an unpublished commentary on King's beating, titled, *It Don't Take Much to Piss Off a Cop*. I wrote the commentary not only because of the extent of the brutality inflicted upon King, but also because, as a teenager, I had both witnessed and experienced unwarranted attacks by Baltimore City police officers. Those attacks left me scarred for decades. As a result, I knew instinctively that the attack on Rodney King was no isolated incident, and that the police daily inflict unjustified attacks on Blacks much more often than the public realizes or acknowledges.

In light of the current national and international outrage over the public brutalization and murder of George Floyd and countless others at the hands of police, I thought it timely to update that commentary, highlighting the impact of systemic racism in policing throughout the USA. I submit for your consideration, '*It Don't Take Much to Piss Off a Cop*.'¹

In 1963, my 16-yr-old brother, Sonny, was being arrested for public drunkenness. As he stumbled into the patrol wagon, he fell backward against the arresting officer, who then repeatedly hit Sonny in the head with a "billy club" (baton) as he threw Sonny into the patrol wagon. I was angered and frightened by the situation but felt helpless to do anything about it. I would have my day in court, I thought; I would tell the judge about it. In court, the judge saw that my brother had bandages around his head, having been carried to the hospital sometime during the night and receiving numerous stitches. The judge asked the arresting officer what happened to my brother's head, to which the cop replied, "We had to subdue him, your honor; he was resisting arrest." The judge would not even listen to protests to the contrary from Sonny or me. This situation was one of several incidents with the police that supported my belief that there was no justice for Blacks in the criminal justice system.

Sometime later, two policemen chased two buddies and me for shooting dice, lined us up against a wall, and patted us down. My buddy, Clay, started giving the cops lip because they found no evidence on us (we had thrown the dice away while running). One cop hit Clay several times in the side with the baton. Robert and I said nothing, but the cop hit us both anyway, I guess as 'required' by Baltimore City Police SOP. If you have not been hit by a police baton, you don't know what pain really is; the pain is excruciating. As a result, my mouth has been forever sealed when around cops.

Fear, anxiety, and immediate submission always overcome me whenever I am approached by a cop.

At 16, I was arrested for a status offense, i.e., being a minor in possession of an alcoholic beverage, and I was placed in a holding cell, awaiting trial the next day. 'Fella,' a guy I knew from the neighborhood, was in the next cell. Fella was a known police fighter -- that is, if they hit him, he'd hit them back. All during the night, cops came in and took turns beating and kicking the s--t out of him. It still echoes in my head: "Where's that f---ing nigger who likes to fight?" cops would ask as they came in for their turn at Fella. I prayed to God that they did not get confused and mistakenly come into my cell to give me some of what they were giving Fella.

Even now, as I approach middle age, when the police stop me for anything -- anything -- I am automatically gripped with fear, and I become what I can only describe as "overly submissive." My wife doesn't understand this; "Why do you let them intimidate you?" she asks. But I know very well that it doesn't take much to piss off a cop!

I believe many of those not outraged by the brutalization of Rodney King rationalized that he was of dubious character and that he had clearly violated the law during the high-speed chase surrounding his arrest for drunk driving. The upshot of this stance is that the police are justified in exercising whatever degree of force they desire once you piss them off. Besides the fact that it takes very little to piss off a cop, the problem with that rationalization is that it grants the police powers well beyond their official mandate to protect, serve and, when necessary, to apprehend and detain; it allows cops to mete out whatever punishment they deem appropriate. Some authorities would have us believe that the Rodney King incident is a result of a few policeman gone bad; but truth be known, it happens much more often than we think.

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Today, nearly 30 years after writing that commentary, I find myself revisiting it, now that -- thanks to cell phone videos -- the country, in fact the world, has witnessed the dispassionate murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police officers who apprehended Floyd on May 25, 2020 for the horrendous, very violent crime of allegedly passing a counterfeit \$20 bill. This follows nearly 6 years after the public's witness to the murder of Eric Garner in July 17, 2014 at the hands of New York City police for the equally heinous crime of *allegedly* selling untaxed cigarettes. Both Floyd and Garner pleaded that they could not breathe prior to their deaths. In the intervening six years, we've also seen cell phone video of cops' totally unwarranted use of deadly force against many Blacks, including Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO; 12-yr-old Tamir Rice in Cleveland, OH; Freddie Gray in Baltimore, MD; Walter Scott in

Charleston, SC; Philandro Castille in St. Paul, MN; Alton Sterling in Baton Rouge, LA; and Stephon Clark in Sacramento, CA just to name a few. Heaven knows how many other Blacks have been murdered by police without benefit of video documentation.

Large segments of the American public now recognize the reality of police brutality and demand change. However, like in the Rodney King incident, some people, even at the highest level of government -- still want the public to believe that excessive force incidents result from the actions of “a few bad apples.” For example, “President Donald Trump flatly denied that systemic racism exist in American police departments, declaring that as many as 99.9 percent of the nation’s officers are great, great people...”² The fact that these incidents of unwarranted police action against Blacks occur virtually nationwide, with horrible frequency, and have a history dating back to Slavery shows that Trump’s assertions are not based in reality.

In contrast, former President Barak Obama, speaking about civil rights and policing at recent virtual town hall meetings in the wake of the world-wide protests surrounding the police killing of George Floyd, observed that systemic racism is a contributing factor in police conduct. He urged police departments and city governments to review and revise their institutional policies to increase trust between police and the communities they are tasked to protect and serve.³

Regardless of where one stands with respect to the existence of institutionalized racism in policing, it is difficult to ignore the data that clearly reveal differential racial treatment in the criminal justice system. According to the Sentencing Project, “racial disparity in the criminal justice system exists when the proportion of a racial or ethnic group within the control of the system is greater than the proportion of such groups in the general population.”⁴ Racial disparity is reported by the Stanford Open Policing Project.⁵ This policing project represents an interdisciplinary research team consisting of researchers and journalists at Stanford University. The team has established a process for the collection, analysis, and reporting of data on pedestrian and vehicle stops across the country. They report having collected and made available over 200 million records. Some key findings from The Stanford Open Policing Project are:

- 1) 50,000 Americans are pulled over by police every day;
- 2) Black and Hispanic drivers are ticketed, searched and arrested at higher rates than Whites; and
- 3) Black and Hispanic drivers are searched based on less evidence than are White drivers.

Clearly the Stanford Open Policing Project findings support the complaint of discriminatory policing in cities and states throughout this country and are consistent with other research. For instance McPhillips’ Mapping Police Violence study indicated that, on average, 1,100 unarmed people were killed as a result of harm by police between January 2013 and December 2019.⁶ Nearly one-third were Black, though Blacks comprise less than 14% of the US population. These findings are even more disturbing when one considers that minorities’ interactions with the police may, of themselves, lead to increased psychological stress and criminality.⁷ The research literature is replete with studies supporting the existence of differential treatment of minorities by police and go beyond the scope of this presentation.

There remains a common misconception that law-abiding citizens have no reason to fear the police. I contend that police have long discounted the rights and safety of innocent Black

citizens. Isaiah McKinnon, the retired police chief of the Detroit Police Department and retired college professor described his brutal attack by police when he was just 14 years old:

“In 1957, I was a freshman at Cass Technical High School. As I walked home after speaking with my favorite teacher, four White police officers jumped out of their cruiser, threw me against it and beat me severely. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Officers in the feared “Big Four” were well-known in the Black community for brutally maintaining their kind of “Law and Order.” The more I screamed, the more they beat me. Time seemed to stand still as I saw the anger on their faces and the horror on the faces of Black people who gathered around us, yelling for the police to stop.

After what felt like hours, they told me to get my ass out of there. I ran home crying but did not tell my parents, fearful that it would put them in danger. I was 14, the same age [*as Emmett Till when he was killed in Mississippi*](#) two years earlier. I was scared, angry and confused. Why did they hurt me?”⁸

Furthermore, police, armed with “no-knock” warrants, as well as a disregard for the rights and safety of Black citizens, have caused the deaths of many blameless Blacks that we know of, including 75-year-old Minister Acelynne Williams in 1994; 54-year-old Alberta Spruill in 2003; 92-year-old Kathryn Johnston in 2006; 7-year-old Aiyana Mo’Nay Stanley-Jones in 2010; and 26-year-old Breonna Taylor in 2020.

The important takeaway here is that police assaults on Blacks, as in the killing of George Floyd, are not unfortunate aberrations, but are the consistent and logical result of the systemic racism that permeates police departments throughout this country. The typical police mandate “to protect and serve” should produce a sense of comradery between the police and individuals in the community. However, a recent Baltimore survey of police and community relations reveals that fear of and dissatisfaction with the police is commonplace.⁹ The survey of over 600 residents revealed that 60% of the participants were dissatisfied with the police department, which included 57% who were very dissatisfied. Furthermore, most of the participants did not trust the Baltimore Police Department (BPD), including 45% of the participants reporting that they were nervous when they saw the police. The survey yielded individual reports of harassing interactions with police that were remarkably similar to my own decades earlier.

“... [one] resident said his brother was “brutally attacked by six police officers. He showed no resistance and had his hands up, but the officers continued to beat him and then tased him. He did not touch any officers but was charged with six counts of assaulting an officer — supposedly one count for each officer that was beating him up. Those counts were later all thrown out.”⁹

As a result of investigations regarding racial discrimination by the BPD, Baltimore became one of several cities that entered a consent decree signed by the United State Department of Justice to promote reform within the police department.⁹ Specifically, the consent decree established mediation procedures designed to ... “build trust and improve public safety by mitigating the impacts of discrimination.” Additionally, implicit bias training and community policing have been key pillars adopted by various police departments to address systemic racism.

Unfortunately, Black parents across this country are forced to have “the talk” with their children because of the fear that their children may be harmed when approached by those who are “sworn to protect and serve”. “The talk” is a rite of passage for many Black adolescents. According to Luke,

“For most White families, “the talk” deals with the birds and the bees, but for Black families, it has increasingly centered around a different topic: How to behave if stopped by a police officer. It’s a conversation that parents of Black children say they feel is necessary to protect their kids, and it typically happens in elementary school.”¹⁰

Despite mounting evidence that racial discrimination in policing exist throughout this country, the question of what can be done to effect change remains. Cries to “defund the police” have been heard nationwide, but the meaning is variable and unclear. For many, the idea of defunding the police conjures up images of a lawless society. However, an increase in criminal behavior does not necessarily follow a reduction in police presence. In fact, crime went down as a result of defunding the police in Camden, N.J.¹¹

Consistent with the defund the police momentum, according to Zerkel the outcry for change demands that more resources be diverted from traditional police departments and redirected to community resources which must be bolstered to effectively address issues requiring social and/or economic intervention rather than police intervention.¹²

“That’s why we must stop investing in police and incarceration and instead intentionally invest in alternative models that are centered in community and address the root causes of harm, in addition to making greater investments in schools, health care, and other human needs that keep our communities safe.”¹²

Zerkel’s proposal for defunding the police is rooted in the belief that the current policing model is outdated. That is, traditionally police are trained to take total control, dominate, and use all force they deem necessary.

“...our criminal legal system was built to reinforce deep structural racism in our society. For most individuals and communities of color, policing has brought terror rather than safety.”¹²

Training can lead police officers to believe that every encounter and every individual is a threat and potentially life-threatening; hence, they must always be on their guard. They can be shown heart-wrenching dash-cam footage of officers being beaten, disarmed, or gunned down after a moment of inattention or hesitation. This major focus on “expecting the worst” in every situation produces an officer who is more likely scared for their own safety and likely to overreact.

Training offers little on understanding unconscious biases and their potential impact on officer behavior. Such lack of awareness may lead officers to perceive a greater threat from Black men than from others. There is often insufficient training on de-escalation and other flexible tactics that may reduce conflicts. Moreover, administrators must be more open to reviewing officer’s use of force and use the review process to improve training.

Armed with a better understanding of why it doesn't take much to piss off a cop, perhaps we can now reconceptualize policing so that officers can indeed protect and serve, rather than intimidate and oppress.

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