

# **Police Brutality: Causes**

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## ***Abstract***

*Police Brutality by definition is the use of excessive force, usually physical, but potentially in the form of verbal attacks and psychological intimidation, by a police officer. What are the underlying causes of police brutality? This report explores the possible reasons that precede an act including Agency Attitude and Culture, Racial Profiling, and the Impact of Female Officers.*

## **Introduction**

Police Brutality. The words conjure images of bloodied faces, armed officers standing over prone individuals, perhaps even angry crowds gathered in protest. If these scenes depict the aftermath of an act of extreme violence, what then is the antecedent to the behavior? What drives an officer, sworn to uphold the law, to use excessive force? Might it be a learned behavior, one inadvertently perpetuated by the individual's agency, or, is it from silent prejudices against individuals of a certain race, or perhaps, is it the gender discrepancy that exists in the field of law enforcement? By exploring the possible reasons that precede an act of brutality we may better understand how to prevent the act from occurring. With this in mind, I will delve into the subject by investigating three possible origins: Agency Attitude and Culture, Racial Profiling, and the Impact of Female Officers.

## **Literature Review**

### **Police Culture Causes Police Brutality**

All across the country more and more people are complaining about police brutality and misconduct. Though the loudest outcry about police brutality emanating from the Black community and communities of color, complaints from White people are on the increase (Chicago Citizen, 1997). Though it is White cops who are disproportionately involved in perpetrating acts of police brutality, unfortunately Black officers and officers of color have occasionally been found to be among the most brutal within police forces across the country (Chicago Citizen, 1997). Ron Hampton, executive director of the National Black Police Association (NBPA), responded that there is a "police culture" and "mentality" which is responsible for the renegade cops who terrorize communities (Chicago Citizen, 1997). Large numbers of people, particularly men, aspire to be cops precisely because they see it as an opportunity to

exercise authority and control over people. A badge and a gun are also an outlet for many men to express their “machoness.” Hence instead of becoming police officers to serve, protect and be accountable to the people in the community, far too many people become cops so that they can be “enforcers” of the law (Chicago Citizen, 1997).

### **An Esprit de Corps**

Hampton suggests that these negative motivations for joining the men and women in blue are reinforced in police academies where a kind of “we-against-them” attitude is cultivated intentionally or unintentionally (Chicago Citizen, 1997). Police academies also consciously develop an esprit de corps that bonds the officers into a fraternity of sorts in which there is a strong sense of loyalty to one another. It is this esprit de corps which produces the infamous “blue wall of silence” which often shields officers who commit acts of police brutality and misconduct and prevents them from being prosecuted. As a consequence, while the community is well aware of the reality of police brutality and misconduct, it is extremely difficult to prove it because of the almost impenetrable wall of silence which serves as a protective cover for renegade cops (Chicago Citizen, 1997).

### **Guilty of Complicity**

While the majority of cops may be decent people who do not engage in acts of brutality and misconduct, they are nonetheless guilty of complicity with brutality and misconduct because their sense of fraternity and loyalty predisposes them to look the other way or be silent when renegade cops carry out their foul deeds (Chicago Citizen, 1997). Ron Hampton believes that there must be a major effort inside police departments to transform the culture that breeds police brutality and misconduct and that this process must begin with the training (Chicago Citizen, 1997).

Several years ago, the Mollen Commission, which was formed to study police corruption in New York City, found that excessive force and assault were commonplace in the police force. As one officer, nicknamed “The Mechanic” for his skill in beating people up, testified, “We’d just beat people up in general...to show who was in charge.” The Mollen Commission also found that lying under oath was so rampant among police officers, they had coined a word for it- “testilying” (Burris & Whitney, 1999).

The problem is, the few bad cops get away with it time and time again, in large measure because of the code of silence. I’ve talked to many police officers who felt sickened by what they had seen a brutal cop do, but the price for speaking out was simply too high. Clearly, the resolution of the problem begins with strong leadership in the law-enforcement hierarchy, and more careful attention to hiring, training, and evaluating police officers (Burris & Whitney, 1999).

### **Blacks and Cops in Conflict**

Cops and blacks each spin their mythologies on separate but parallel tracks. Police abuse solidifies anger, hopelessness, and fear. Sometimes it leads to violence. Cops, in turn, justify their actions by holding high the lawlessness of a few as an excuse

to suspend the rights of the innocent. Entrenched as warriors in opposing foxholes, the two sides wait for their moments (Burriss & Whitney, 1999).

And so it goes, our nation practices a selective blindness. In this great and strong nation, we have all become unwitting accomplices to the continuation of the conflict. For too long, we have allowed ourselves to believe that our country has grown out of its former biases- that the past years of racial hatred have at least been stored away in our shameful past. We have been comforted in the belief that it's unthinkable in this day and age that a black man could be tortured by a state-sanctioned mob. We were sickened by the videotape of police officers beating Rodney King, but we convinced ourselves it was an isolated incident. If this sort of thing happened all the time, we'd *know* about it, wouldn't we? The truth is, we *do* know about it. But in this great land where life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are the highest values, we do not treat every citizen equally. We view blacks as a seamless mass, not as individuals. We tar all blacks with the lawless acts of the few (Burriss & Whitney, 1999).

It's no wonder that there is such a state of tension and conflict between black communities and cops. Think about it and you begin to see all the signs of a relationship that has failed. Now it's become a vicious cycle. When a police officer behaves in a disrespectful, arbitrary, and possible violent way toward a citizen, that citizen (along with his family, his friends, and anyone who observed the incident) is going to feel he can't trust the police. The next time he has an encounter with a cop, he's probably going to be suspicious, reluctant to cooperate, and even disrespectful. This attitude will only frustrate and anger the cop, and perhaps lead to an incident that will drive the two sides even farther apart. And on it goes, until an entire community and police force are caught up in this hostile tango. No one wants to believe police misconduct is possible. Because if you start believing the police are capable of hurting you, your entire sense of security is shattered. Who do you call when you're injured or scared? Who do you call when the bad guys are knocking at your door? Many black people I know are afraid to call the police when they're in danger. It's like Little Red Riding Hood running away from the wolf to Grandma's house, only to find that Grandma *is* the wolf (Burriss & Whitney, 1999).

Burriss indicates "I have been involved in many such, typically involving white police officers and black male citizens. I know two for certain: one, police shootings are *always* complex; and two, most people just don't want to acknowledge the complexity." (Burriss & Whitney, 1999). In the aftermath of a police shooting, there is outrage in the community, and defensive control in the police department, and each side locks into its own rigid position. Most people choose sides without knowing any details. This polarization makes it virtually impossible to find out the truth or to resolve genuine issues of police procedure and conduct (Burriss & Whitney, 1999). "We must remember that the very first police forces in this country were the slave patrols, so certain racist assumptions are designed into the very structure of policing in America. Racism is prompted and exacerbated by the economic fears of whites, and police are seen as the thin blue line protecting them from their fears. That's the structural set-up that gets us in so much trouble". (Muwakkil, 1999).

In the lingo of the streets, it's called DWB-Driving While Black-or WWB-Walking While Black. This refers to what many blacks believe to be the true nature of the charges made against them. They fit the "profile," they fit the stereotype. One of the

most famous recent DWB cases involves Jonny Gammage, the first cousin of professional football player Ray Seals of the Pittsburgh Steelers. Pulled over by the police while driving Seals' late-model Jaguar, Jonny Gammage was beaten and suffocated to death by five Pittsburgh-area police officers. He was dead seven minutes after they'd pulled him over. His crime? Apparently Jonny Gammage committed no crime-except driving a late-model Jaguar while black (Burriss & Whitney, 1999).

In order to reduce police misconduct, police must integrate more women officers into their departments. Moving from a male-dominated police force that is based on violence to a female-centered one based on negotiation is vital to ensure that police treat both suspects and the victims of crimes with respect. International research shows that across many cultures women police officers use force less frequently than their male counterparts, are less authoritarian when interacting with citizens and lower-ranking officers, have better communication and negotiation skills, and are more likely than male officers to diffuse potentially violent situations. (Fitzsimmons, 2001). National and international research shows conclusively that increasing the numbers of women on police departments measurably reduces police violence and improves police effectiveness and service to communities. The studies also show that women officers respond more effectively than their male counterparts to violence against women, which accounts for up to 50% of all calls to police (Fitzsimmons, 2001).

Along with most other people, I once believed that the problem of police brutality could be largely remedied if we brought more minority and women officers into the community. Minority officers would be more understanding of the community environment, the lingo, the customs. Women are known to be more effective communicators and better listeners. They would be unlikely to participate in the "macho" clashes that so often occur between white cops and black men (Burriss & Whitney, 1999).

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research is to explore the prevalence of police brutality and the possible contributing factors to its occurrence. Members of the Ocala Police Department Community Operations Bureau were invited to participate in the survey. The survey was a three-page handout that was administered during shift briefing(s); the surveys were turned in by each participant, anonymously, at a predetermined location. The survey and the full text of the survey is available in appendix-A. This type of survey had no cost and was convenient to each individual taking the survey. The survey consisted of eleven (11) multiple choice questions focusing on the observations and experiences of officers regarding incidences of police brutality.

## Results

In order to obtain data regarding the topic of police brutality, I chose to survey 20 members the Ocala Police Department, middle management down to line officers. The survey consisted of eleven questions, the first focusing on the demographic data stated previously. The remaining questions centered around issues pertaining to on the job observations regarding items that may contribute to police brutality, and, how the officers would respond in situations where police brutality took place. Responses for the survey questions included multiple choice prompts, yes/no/no opinion, and strongly agree to strongly disagree. The response rate was 100% and all questions were answered by the officers.

### 1. How many years of experience do you have in law enforcement?

- |             |       |   |
|-------------|-------|---|
| • 0-5       | 40.0% | 8 |
| • 6-10      | 10.0% | 2 |
| • 11-15     | 35.0% | 7 |
| • 16 & over | 15.0% | 3 |

### 2. Which gender do you think is more likely to be the victim of police brutality?

- |                                     |       |    |
|-------------------------------------|-------|----|
| • Men                               | 80.0% | 16 |
| • Women                             | 0.0%  | 0  |
| • Even distribution between genders | 15.0% | 3  |
| • Not sure                          | 5.0%  | 1  |

### 3. Taser (use of electronic shock) is a form of police brutality?

- |              |       |    |
|--------------|-------|----|
| • Yes        | 5.0%  | 1  |
| • No         | 95.0% | 19 |
| • No Opinion | 0.0%  | 0  |

### 4. Pepper spray is a form of police brutality?

- |              |       |    |
|--------------|-------|----|
| • Yes        | 5.0%  | 1  |
| • No         | 95.0% | 19 |
| • No Opinion | 0.0%  | 0  |

### 5. Racial profiling leads to police brutality?

- |                             |       |   |
|-----------------------------|-------|---|
| • Strongly Agree            | 5.0%  | 1 |
| • Agree                     | 25.0% | 5 |
| • Neither Agree or Disagree | 35.0% | 7 |
| • Disagree                  | 25.0% | 5 |
| • Strongly Disagree         | 10.0% | 2 |

**6. Lack of female officers within an agency leads to police brutality?**

- Strongly Agree 5.0% 1
- Agree 0.0% 0
- Neither Agree or Disagree 15.0% 3
- Disagree 50.0% 10
- Strongly Disagree 30.0% 6

**7. Brutal force should never be used by a police officer?**

- Strongly Agree 15.0% 3
- Agree 10.0% 2
- Neither Agree or Disagree 35.0% 7
- Disagree 5.0% 1
- Strongly Disagree 35.0% 7

**8. One is more likely to discriminate against someone of a race/ethnicity different than his/her own?**

- Strongly Agree 0.0% 0
- Agree 25.0% 5
- Neither Agree or Disagree 15.0% 3
- Disagree 45.0% 9
- Strongly Disagree 15.0% 3

**9. Agency climate/attitude leads to police brutality?**

- Strongly Agree 0.0% 0
- Agree 45.0% 9
- Neither Agree or Disagree 15.0% 3
- Disagree 25.0% 5
- Strongly Disagree 15.0% 3

**10. If you were in a situation where you experienced/witnessed a mild form of police brutality, you would report it?**

- Strongly Agree 35.0% 7
- Agree 45.0% 9
- Neither Agree or Disagree 10.0% 2
- Disagree 10.0% 2
- Strongly Disagree 0.0% 0

**11. If you were in a situation where you experienced/witnessed a severe form of police brutality, you would report it?**

- Strongly Agree 60.0% 12
- Agree 35.0% 7
- Neither Agree or Disagree 5.0% 1
- Disagree 0.0% 0
- Strongly Disagree 0.0% 0

## Discussion

The intent of my survey was to gauge the thoughts of my fellow officers regarding the heated issue of police brutality. In my opening statement, I shared my thoughts on possible causes of police brutality based on my research, and, geared my questions to my findings. Three of the survey questions focused on my hypothesis:

1. Racial Profiling leads to police brutality?
2. Lack of female officers within an agency leads to police brutality?
3. Agency climate/attitude leads to police brutality?

Regarding the issue of racial profiling leading to police brutality, six officers agreed/strongly agreed, seven disagreed/strongly disagreed, and, 7 were in the middle. The data may suggest that there is a divide when it comes to race playing a role in the way individuals are dealt with. This may be cultural or geographical, however, it is hard to be absolutely sure without having a larger interview pool.

Over 50% of the officers disagree that lack of female officers within an agency lead to police brutality. This result is not surprising to me. Prior to conducting my research I probably would have said the same thing; however, now I believe that female officers do bring a calming effect and are much better at certain aspects of policing than their counterparts. In my opinion, this is because female officers are not viewed as threatening, often deal with female victims and kids in an understanding way, and, female officers often think of alternatives to using force.

The last area of my hypothesis focused on climate and attitude. Of the officers interviewed, nine of them agree that the attitude and climate of an agency leads to police brutality, five officers disagreed, and, three strongly disagreed. The remaining three officers chose to be neutral. Reflecting on this, I feel that this question does indicate that the climate and attitude of an agency, specifically at the leadership level, does influence the officer's ethical behavior.

In an effort to dig deeper into the subject of police brutality, I also asked questions focusing on more specific areas including gender, race, and, policing tools.

With 16 of 20 responses, the OPD officers overwhelmingly felt that men are more likely to be victims of police brutality over women. In addition to gender, eight of the 20 officers answered that a person of a different race or ethnicity is more likely to be discriminated against by an individual of a different race/ethnicity, while 12 disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. This information leads me to believe that the officers interviewed are fair and reasonable when dealing with the citizens of our city, regardless of race and ethnicity.

On the subject of common policing tactics, only one officer felt that using items such as pepper spray or a Taser would demonstrate police brutality. As pepper spray and Tasers are tools used to gain compliance and control, and, are considered intermediate non-lethal weapons that do not cause major injury, it is my belief that the responses would be different if a definition of brutality had been provided.

My last questions focused on the feelings and attitudes of the officers regarding the use of force, and, whether or not they would report a witnessed incident. Again, I

feel that the answers may have been somewhat different had I provided a more detailed definition of brutal force and mild/severe police brutality.

As to whether brutal force should NEVER be used by a police officer, eight of the 20 officers either disagreed or strongly disagreed, suggesting that they feel that brutal force is necessary in some situations. Five of the officers agreed that brute force should never be used. Seven officers neither agreed nor disagreed, perhaps needing more details to answer one way or the other.

When asked as to whether or not an officer would report a mild or a severe form of police brutality, the trend was on agree to strongly agree. Fifteen officers answered that they would report a mild incident, with only two disagreeing and two neither agreeing nor disagreeing. Nineteen of the 20 officers replied that they would report an incident of severe police brutality, 12 of which strongly agreed. While I am not overly surprised with this result, I am a little concerned that one individual neither agreed/disagreed with the question/statement. Morals and ethics play a big part in much of what we do as law enforcement officers; we also contend with the "thin blue line" or the "blue wall" which may have come into play with the individual who neither agreed nor disagreed.

Looking back on my survey questions and the results, it is my opinion that when designing the questions, more specific information or definitions should have been utilized. The data suggests that individual officers may interpret terminology, specifically what constitutes mild or severe police brutality and brute force, differently which may have impacted their answers. I feel that had I provided scenarios or definitions, the responses may have differed. Furthermore, it is hard to reach a conclusion regarding our agency based on the small sample, 20 of 180 officers, surveyed.

In conclusion, based on my research and the findings of my survey, I feel that agency attitude and culture, racial profiling, and, the impact of female officers does, in fact, have some influence on the incidence of police brutality at some level. Different scenarios and situations, victims and perpetrators, and, perhaps the team of officers on scene may also have some impact. Police brutality is a real issue, but, I feel that with proper training and strong leadership, the incidence of brute force can be decreased or extinguished.

Lieutenant Lou Biondi has been in law enforcement for 25 years. He started his law enforcement career in 1988 with the U.S. Army as a Military Police Officer. In September of 1993 he joined the Ocala Police Department, and has been there since. He moved up through the ranks and was promoted to lieutenant in 2008, where he currently serves as a Watch Commander in the Community Policing Bureau (Patrol). Lou is currently working on his Bachelor of Science Degree in Criminal Justice Administration from Columbia Southern University.

## References

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## Appendix – A

### Thoughts on Police Brutality

1. **How many years of experience do you have in law enforcement?**
  - 0-5
  - 6-10
  - 11-15
  - 16 & over
  
2. **Which gender do you think is more likely to be the victim of police brutality?**
  - Men
  - Women
  - Even distribution between genders
  - Not sure
  
3. **Taser (use of electronic shock) is a form of police brutality.**
  - Yes
  - No
  - No Opinion
  
4. **Pepper Spray is a form of police brutality.**
  - Yes
  - No
  - No Opinion

**5. Racial profiling leads to police brutality.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**6. Lack of female officers within an agency leads to police brutality.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**7. Brutal force should never be used by a police officer.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**8. One is more likely to discriminate against someone of a race/ethnicity different than his/her own.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**9. Agency climate/attitude leads to police brutality.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**10. If you were in a situation where you experienced/witnessed a mild form of police brutality, you would report it.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree

**11. If you were in a situation where you experienced/witnessed a severe form of police brutality, you would report it.**

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neither Agree or Disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree