
A Study on Law Enforcement Cruelty in America

Forty three percent of police officers agree with the statement, “always following the rules is not compatible with getting the job done” (“Police Brutality Statistics”). Police brutality is becoming a more serious phenomenon than it has ever been in the past. Police brutality has been around for a very long time, including hundreds of cases in the 90’s, but recently there have been cases into the thousands around the United States. Gregory Umbach, a history professor, defines police brutality as the “use of any force exceeding that reasonably necessary to accomplish a lawful police purpose” (“Police Brutality”). Some of the more shocking statistics have been collected more recently including 4,861 Reports of police misconduct in 2010 (Packman). Officers will attempt to rationalize or justify their misconduct in a number of ways, including: Denial of Victim, which means because there is no legitimate victim, there is no misconduct, Victim of Circumstance, which justifies behaving improperly because the officer had no other choice, and Blame the Victim which tries to state that the victim asked for suffering or misconduct by breaking the law in the first place (Fitch). Police are supposed to be examples for citizens to follow, but have recently been proving their incorrect method of law enforcement through cases of physical abuse toward citizens, cases of mental abuse toward citizens, and a confusion of what is right and wrong.

Physical Abuse is one of the main aspects and most common method of police brutality. Physical Abuse includes any physical harm cause by a police officer. These acts are unnecessary and not provoked by the victims. If there is reason for some physical harm, it does not count as abuse, but most likely self-defense. An excerpt from a book by Diane Wetendorf describes a possible explanation of physical abuse when she states, “If these methods fail to achieve the level of control and "respect" that he craves, he may resort to physical violence. His police training taught him how to use his body — his hands, elbows, legs and knees — as weapons. He knows techniques that inflict great pain yet leave no bruises or broken bones. He might use the "tools of the trade": devices such as handcuffs, his boots or his gun” (Wetendorf).

Physical abuse is apparent almost every day, especially recently. A very well publicized case, concerns a young man in Ferguson Missouri named Michael Brown, an 18 year old, who was walking around with a friend about the same age. Brown and his friend had robbed a store, unarmed, and then began walking back to Brown’s home. Officer Wilson was called to a nearby house, responding to a sick child; Wilson had no idea about the store being robbed until after the incident. After leaving the sick child, Officer Wilson stopped Brown and his friend to tell them to get out of the middle of the street. Brown and his friend told the officer they were almost home and then when Officer Wilson got out of his car he hit Brown with the door so the boys backed away, scared. When the boys were going away from the car, Wilson thought they were running and shot Brown in the chest twice. This case is such a great example because Officer Wilson had no reason to harm the boys in any way, especially because he did not know about the robbery, he had only stopped them for being in the street. This kind of harm was unnecessary and excessive; therefore it can be categorized as physical police brutality.

Another well-known example of physical abuse is the case of Rodney King. This case became a news sensation overnight, with CNN and national news letting it reach almost everyone. In 1991, Rodney King and some friends were involved in an 8-mile high speed chase followed by

the LA Police Department. After 8 miles, King and his friends were surrounded and attempted to get physical with the police. This is a case that would justify police using self-defense in order to get King and the others to stop, but once they stopped the officers continued. After King was shot with a Taser gun, he was beaten and kicked repeatedly. The officers used necessary force at first, which was, at that point, the only way to stop King, but after King was down they used an excessive amount of force.

The final example of Physical violence is less popular, but just as important to learn about. Kathryn Johnston was a 92 year old woman, victimized by the police. While sitting in her home in 2006, police officers burst into her home with no warning. The officers were informed that a man had bought drugs from someone that lived with Johnston, but not in Johnston's home, itself. After her house was burst into, Johnston fired at the police, not knowing who had come in or why, and she was shot five or six times. There is no doubt of excessive force and abuse in this case, but the important piece of it is that the police eventually plead guilty to manslaughter and admitted that they used unnecessary action.

Mental Abuse is any psychological or emotional harm cause by a police officer or his actions. Examples of mental abuse can include psychological or emotional harm cause by physical action, such as PTSD or emotional distress. Another method of mental abuse could be harming an individual without getting physical, such as blaming or accusing a victim. Mental abuse doesn't show as many cases as physical abuse, but more and more cases are coming out over the years. Cases of mental abuse aren't as common, but emotional distress caused by physical abuse is apparent in almost every physical abuse case.

The first example of police initiated mental abuse is a young, black woman, Daniele Watts. Watts is an actress from Los Angeles and was in the new, popular movie, "Django: Unchained". Daniele Watts was kissing her white boyfriend in public one day, when a police officer approached them. The officer mistook Watts for a prostitute, asked her for her ID, and attempted an arrest. Watts then burst into tears and explained who she was, then immediately published the story to social media in order to inform as many people as possible about the incident (Rosenberg, Harding). This is an example of racial profiling by police officers, leading to obvious emotional distress toward Ms. Watts.

Another example of mental abuse and an example of victims being blamed for the abuse is a video of a man named John Compagne. In California in 2009, Compagne was being held in custody as a suspect. The officers were asking him questions and Compagne couldn't hear them because he was turned away from them while three of them were talking at once. As Compagne said, "What? I can't hear you", an officer slammed Compagne's head into the wall Compagne was against and knocked him out. The Sheriff of that department tried to defend the officer and say that Compagne provoked the response, but Compagne filed a lawsuit against the officer. In order to justify their actions, "law enforcement officials have lawyers trying to prove you were to blame for your injuries, or force used was necessary and reasonable" ("FAQS About Police").

The last aspect of police brutality is the confusion of right and wrong that officers create for citizens by using excessive force. Police officers are supposed to protect citizens and determine the line between what is right and what is wrong. Their actions have been blending that line so that people don't really know the difference anymore. If citizens can't figure out how to separate right and wrong, how are they expected to know how to act in society anymore.

Officers have now created a skewed image of how to act, and what laws are really necessary to follow.

One way that people can visualize police brutality and relate to it more easily is comparing it to the popular 90's film, Boondock Saints. In the film, the two main characters are brothers that kill vicious criminals, involved in Italian and Russian mobs, in an attempt to convince people to follow the laws. The contradiction is that "The Saints" are killing people to enforce the law, which is breaking the law in itself. This reminds people of police officers when they kill or harm people in order to enforce the law. In the movie, "The Saints" are viewed as bad guys, whereas police are viewed as heroes. Some similarities between the police and "The Saints" are that they use violence and brutality to enforce the law and that they set examples for citizens. The differences are that "The Saints" kill criminals and admit their method is wrong, but necessary; police often kill innocent people and don't always admit they are wrong, but try to justify it instead. "The Saints" are run out of town at the end of the movie, police are rewarded and people justify their actions.

Another way of looking at how police are confusing right and wrong is to think about the fact that police are supposed to be an example, but they are killing, is killing the new example to live by? If the police are killing, they can't tell citizens that killing is wrong because they are supposed to uphold the law just as much as citizens. If police show bad examples, such as killing and harming innocent people, citizens no longer know what a good example is and what a bad example is. If all police need is justification in order to get away with a murder, is it the same for citizens? If citizens come up with a justification for killing someone, like officers do, who judges if it is a good or bad reason? These questions can be answered, but they aren't being answered. There are no longer boundaries of right and wrong.

Police officers are heroes that protect citizens every day and keep people safe from crime. Although there are numerous cases of police brutality, there are countless cases of police performing amazing and heroic acts. Without police officers, there would be no order, more crime, and the freedom this country has would be taken advantage of by citizens. Police officers are usually morally good people and protect citizens with their lives, they just need to admit that they sometimes go too far with their method of enforcement and creating a contradiction.

Through these cases, no one can really tell if these protectors are simply protecting, or going too far with force and violence. Physical means are okay to use as a police officer, until it reaches excessive force, then it crosses the line that citizens need. Without that line, the law enforcement system will be one big free-for-all. Police should never feel the need to abuse a suspect mentally or emotionally because police are respected and people deserve the same respect back. The statement, "always following the rules is not compatible with getting the job done" is proof that there are officers out there that know they are using an inhumane method of enforcement, but fortunately, it is only 43% of officers that agree, which shows that there are still a number of officers that respect citizens as equals and know that force can be necessary to use, but not excessively.