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Race and Policing on the Second Anniversary of Ferguson

Abstract

"There's a tendency to make each civilian death an indictment of all police and to make each officer death the fault of those who dare criticize police."

Posting about changes in law enforcement from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/race-and-policing-on-the-second-anniversary-of-ferguson/>

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Comments

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Race and Policing on the Second Anniversary of Ferguson

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Donald Roth

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2016

To love simple narratives and binary problems is hard-wired into us. A world of stark black-and-white is nowhere near as scary as one where it's not always clear who the good guys are. For Christians, this notion is especially appealing to us because the Divine perspective certainly seems to feature binary aspects (e.g. "You cannot serve both God and Mammon"); however, as I grow older, the limitations of human wisdom come into starker contrast for me, and fewer and fewer issues seem clear-cut. Truly, we see through a glass darkly.

As a Criminal Justice professor, the issue of police/community relations has weighed heavily on my mind in the past few years. One of the [first pieces](#) I wrote for iAt was a response to the "no indictment" decision by the grand jury in Ferguson back in 2014.

The case of Michael Brown was not clear-cut. A subsequent Department of Justice [investigation](#) agreed with Officer Darren Wilson's actions, arguing that his use of force was justified and rejecting the "hands up, don't shoot" narrative (which has persisted from that encounter). However, as I also [explained](#), the Department of Justice on the same day released [damning evidence](#) of a pervasive problem with the racial impact of the Ferguson Police Department's tactics and approaches to policing. The narrative was not simple. Officer Wilson was not the villain, but the police were hardly spotless. The protestors' fury appears misplaced as to the specifics of Brown's case, but those angered by the exchange were amply justified by the broader context.

This is not the way that most of our Facebook feeds covered the Michael Brown incident or, indeed, the tragic list of incidents since then. There's a tendency to make each civilian death an indictment of all police and to make each officer death the fault of those who dare criticize police.

When the narratives are so entrenched, I tend to look for data, but that can be confusing, too. However, I think that if we look carefully at some recent data points, we can get a clearer and, most importantly, a more hopeful picture.

Are the Police Motivated by Race?

A [study](#) conducted by Harvard professor Roland Fryer rocked the academic world over the summer. Fryer's study covered several major metropolitan areas and found that there was a statistically significant correlation between a person's race and the likelihood that police would use some level of force on them during an encounter. However, when it came to officer-involved shootings, that correlation disappeared. But with the news honing in on so many tragic deaths, how could this conclusion be true?

This is where it becomes important to dive beneath the headlines. Reading the study, there are two important conclusions to take away. First, this is significant evidence that there is a quantifiable problem with race and policing. Second, that problem seems to recede or vanish when the stakes are highest. Fryer argues that the study shows that some officers are expressing a preference for targeting minorities, but officers are suppressing that bias in the face of the greater scrutiny that comes with the decision to use deadly force.¹

So, what can we learn from the conclusions of this study?

First, we (speaking as a white male) cannot wave away the issue as being the result of "a few bad apples." Although studies suggest that a small minority of officers are the ones generating the largest problems, the persistence of this data suggests that those officers are not being dealt with.²

Further, the scope of the Harvard study's findings suggest that the problem is not restricted to a few bad officers,

even if the issue is far from involving every officer.³ However, the fact that this bias disappears with officer-involved shootings suggests that either initiatives which provide greater scrutiny of police decision-making (see below) or significant efforts to reform police culture could have a major positive impact.⁴

No matter what, statistics on rates do not disprove the notion that raw numbers are simply too high, but the Harvard study does show that there are still reasons to hope for change in police culture.

Has the Public Lost Faith in the Police?

Sir Robert Peel, father of the modern police force, is famously associated with [nine principles](#) that guided the organization of London's Metropolitan Police Force. The second of those principles is: "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions." While modern policing would do well to remember many of the other Peelian principles, one might wonder whether or not this second goal is in danger of being lost beyond recovery in modern America.

According to [Gallup polling data](#), Americans have a declining degree of confidence in the police, and that low faith is particularly distinct in the African American community. Although Americans tend to trust the police more than most institutions, faith in the country's major institutions [hovers around 32%](#). Clearly, policing faces a crisis of confidence that needs to be repaired, regardless of how we feel about who might be to blame for that situation.

Again, however, there is still reason for hope. Gallup also recently released [a poll](#) that tells a different story: While only around half of Americans say that they have confidence in the police as an institution, 76% of Americans (including 67% of nonwhites) say that they respect the police in their area. This data shows a sharp increase of around 15% across the board in all demographics over last year's data, and it suggests that people's suspicion of the institution of policing does not necessarily carry over to the individuals in their community. Therefore, while policing does face a crisis, the situation is not all lost.

Are Any Solutions Working?

Finally, given these signs of hope, is there any reform which seems to be leveraging these insights with beneficial effect?

Currently, bright signs are coming from initiatives concerning body cameras. According to multiple [recent studies](#), body cameras have a significant impact on officer behavior and public perceptions. The linked studies show that officers with body cameras are significantly less likely to use force, while civilian complaints about officers with cameras have been drastically reduced from the amount of those regarding officers without cameras.

However, officers wearing cameras do also tend to issue more tickets and citations. Essentially, the trade off is that officers seem to act in a more professional and productive manner when they think that their actions will be recorded, which may mean that the cost of reforming the police's use of force is paying more speeding tickets.⁵ Ultimately, I think this is a price that society can afford.

Overall, is the crisis of policing more acute today than before Ferguson two years ago? Yes, but that's not completely a bad thing, particularly if a large part of this awareness is driven by finally coming to terms with and addressing the experience of minority communities. Further, there are reasons for hope and signs that some solutions are showing promise. We're far from out of the woods, and I fear that there is yet much grief to be shared and blood to be spilled, but God is merciful, and – by His mercy – there is hope. It is my sincere prayer that hope will be realized soon, in one fashion or another.

Footnotes

1. An officer-involved shooting not only triggers substantial automatic internal review but, in this day and age, is also virtually guaranteed to make headlines. ↩
2. For instance, a [report](#) by the New York City Civilian Complaint Review Board in 2015 found that 1% of officers generated 26% of all use-of-force complaints and 93% of all offensive language complaints. ↩
3. The same NYC Review Board report showed that 86% of officers had no complaints lodged against them during the period of the study. ↩
4. The Harvard study's data set on officer-involved shootings focused on Houston, TX, and its results should only cautiously be generalized if one has reason to believe that Houston is not typical of a metropolitan police force across the country. There is at least [some evidence](#) that the former police chief Charles McClelland took steps to root out racial bias, which demonstrates an anti-racism effort that may not have occurred elsewhere. However the steps may have been accomplished, their impact is demonstrated by the Harvard study. ↩
5. It should be noted that it's unclear yet at this time whether the hyper-awareness of behavior will fade with time. Just look at your favorite reality TV show for evidence that people tend to eventually forget that they're in front of a camera. With that said, police are triggering their cameras, like they would with a vehicle camera, and even though compliance rates were low (42% of incidents were recorded in the Arizona study), a significant impact was still observed. ↩