



## The Continuing Problem of Police Violence — and the Potential for Community Based Reforms

Debanjan Roychoudhury, New York University

Fifty years ago President Lyndon B. Johnson created the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders — known as the Kerner Commission — to address racially charged uprisings across many American cities. The commission's eventual report helped lay the foundation for landmark civil rights legislation. In more recent years, Americans have taken to the streets again to protest the mistreatment of racial minorities, particularly Black people, at the hands of police.

The findings of the Kerner Commission pointed to white racism as the fundamental cause of urban unrest, and the report made it clear that police brutality was at the heart of Black discontent. In the wake of recent civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri; Baltimore, Maryland, and Chicago, Illinois the U.S. Department of Justice released three different reports on the police departments involved and found patterns of discrimination, misconduct, and abuse of power that harken back to the famed civil rights era.

### Policing Beyond the Headlines

In order to better understand the discontents many Americans hold about law enforcement, one must look beyond the few cases of police brutality and killings that make it into the mainstream news cycle. Although instances where police use lethal force garner the most national media attention, most contacts between police and citizens do not end this way. Still for many people, unwarranted or disturbing contacts with law enforcement officials are routine parts of daily life.

Understanding the impact of interactions with law enforcement for individuals and families, especially in the most vulnerable communities, entails in-depth study and evaluation of local law enforcement practices. This means that researchers must clearly define and probe the full spectrum of actions that may be taken by police officers during routine stops. Some key concerns are detailed in Department of Justice report about the Baltimore Police Department:

- **Routine violation of citizen rights** – The report is critical of “zero-tolerance” policing, law enforcement which relies on severe punishment for minor offenses and stops triggered by suspicions, often resulting in unjustified and unwarranted arrests. A similar pattern arises with New York City's controversial stop-and-frisk policy, ruled unconstitutional by a federal judge in 2013.
- **Excessive use of force** – The relevant incidents include chokeholds, tasing, and firing of weapons. Additionally, the report finds that Baltimore police use excessive force against people with mental health disabilities and unreasonable force against juveniles.

- **Sexual harassment** – The report found that police behave inappropriately during strip searches and often do not protect privacy while conducting these invasive procedures. Police also often mishandle sexual assault cases, placing blame on victims by suggesting that the accuser may be responsible and not the accused. Worst cases include Daniel Holtzclaw, convicted for using his position as an Oklahoma City police officer to prey on multiple women.
- **Broken relationships between department and community** – A recurring theme in the report is that police misconduct, excessive use of force, escalation of violence, and harassment lead to the degradation of community trust, undermining civic participation and trust in government as a whole.

## Reimagining Police Reform

Revisiting the issues brought up in the original Kerner Commission report can serve as a benchmark for how far the nation has come — and still has to go. If the findings of the Department of Justice about the Baltimore Police Department are any indication, more remains to be accomplished. In many communities, police are the arm of government most present in people's lives, and thus have a significant impact on the way people view themselves and their place in society and politics. People who fear police force or surveillance are likely to become further alienated and disenfranchised, especially those already on the margins.

Communities where police are constantly present are often the most racially and economically segregated, not by accident. In these areas, law enforcement can appear more as an occupying force than a service to residents. In many communities across the country, residents seriously doubt whether police actually intend to protect and serve those most in need. In fact, police corruption or serious abuse of citizens has been documented in the largest departments in the country — from Los Angeles to Chicago to New York. Of course, criminally convicted units of officers do not define their entire professional communities. But such cases should inspire all police leaders and public officials to recognize the need for honest and transparent public dialogues about how law enforcement can be reformed and improved in coming years.

Meaningful police reform requires forging strong ties with community residents. This means going above and beyond simply diversifying police departments by race and gender – although that can be helpful if for no other reason than because it shows a commitment to ethical hiring practices. Effective police reform also means thinking beyond implicit bias training and requires evaluation the entire structure and institution of policing. National conversations and standards can help, because most departments function autonomously and without much central authority.

Police are in service to the people they work to protect. Their success should thus be measured in significant part by taking into account the views of the people and communities the police serve, not just by general crime and punishment statistics. Research and policy on challenges facing contemporary law enforcement should work from the ground up, assessing the historical legacy of police departments in the respective communities they serve — from Newark, New Jersey to Detroit, Michigan to Watts, California and in every city in between. If done right, civilian oversight and critical evaluation can help to ensure stronger and healthier community-police relations. And everyone will benefit from such improvements.