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POLICE BRUTALITY

By law, the police have the right to use legitimate force if necessary to make an arrest, maintain order, or keep the peace. Just how much force is appropriate under various circumstances can be debatable. When an officer uses excessive force, he or she violates the law. Jerome Skolnick and James Fyfe define police brutality as a conscious and deliberate action that a police officer undertakes toward suspects who are usually members of a powerless social group (for example, racial minorities or homosexuals).

Police brutality has been framed in the past as a civil and human rights issue, and explained in terms of its sociological roots and legal implications. However, similarly to other human rights (eg, reproductive rights), substantial health repercussions arise from its perpetration for individuals as well as for the general public, and recent research in the USA has firmly established police brutality as a public health concern. In addition to the obvious link between police violence with fatality and injury (see panel), empirical evidence has shown harmful mental health consequences that are not limited to victims, but also shared by witnesses to negative police encounters. Apart from premature death and bodily harm, documented health consequences in the USA of negative police interactions include high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, HIV and sexually transmitted infections, as well as anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder.

Most police brutality goes unreported. In 1982, the federal government funded a “Police Services Study” in which over 12,000 randomly selected citizens were interviewed in three metropolitan areas. The study found that 13 percent of those surveyed had been victims of police brutality the previous year. Yet only 30 percent of those who acknowledged such brutality filed formal complaints.

Most brutality is directed against minority groups or otherwise powerless populations. Officers who engage in brutality rationalize their use of extralegal force; they claim they are punishing those groups that threaten to disrupt the social order. The importance of understanding racism in the context of police brutality cannot be underestimated. Many police automatically regard racial minority group members as potentially dangerous regardless of their particular activities, gestures, or attire. This perception of racial minority citizens as “trouble” sometimes translates into racially discriminatory police behavior.

Some police expect citizens to always defer to police authority. When citizens challenge it instead, some officers perceive such behavior as constituting the unofficial crime of contempt of cop and use physical force to elicit compliance. Situational variables, such as the use of force by a suspect against a police officer, are good predictors of police use of force.

Stopping brutality through punitive administrative control Internal affairs units receive and investigate complaints against officers. These units inquire into suspicions of corruption, complaints of brutality or other kinds of excessive force, and situations in which police officers discharge weapons. If an investigation discloses enough evidence to prove the allegations in a complaint, the unit recommends disciplinary action. Major problems in the effectiveness of internal affairs units include the unwillingness of citizens to file complaints (because they don’t trust the police to police themselves) and the unwillingness of police to testify against one another.

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