

Is systemic racism present in American policing?

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Background Information / Personal Standpoint

The public has become hostile towards police officers in America. Considering that officers are meant to ‘protect and serve’ our communities, many people feel unsafe towards them. This is because of the discrimination on people of color (POC), and police officers who seem to be inherently racist towards them. This has been a crucial problem for years now, yet it is only more relevant today. I came up with this question at first by looking through a range of topics that dealt with social class and criminal victimization. I thought that this was something important to research about because social class breaks up Americans into sections in the United States. The way that a person is treated based on their social class in the criminal justice system is extremely different. Therefore, I came up with the question, “Is systemic racism present in American policing?” Race has been a problem that many Americans have faced decade after decade. Considering racism in the line of a police workforce, officers are meant to protect all individuals in their community. It is not fair to treat people differently solely based on the color of their skin.

My question is significant as my initial thoughts tie back to the protests and riots that sparked across the United States during the summer of 2020. This rooted from several different problems but one mainly being the killing of a Black man, George Floyd, by a Minneapolis police officer because he tried to buy a pack of cigarettes with counterfeit money. Considering that I have witnessed these actions during my lifetime, I believe it is important for me to use my ability to research and understand more about this topic, as it affects thousands of people across the nation. I have wondered if it is just an individual officer who is racist towards people of color or if it is the entire police department who are systemically racist. This includes how it could be

embedded in the training of the officers up to the point where they are assigned places to patrol the city. Considering that I am a White, female, young adult I think it is important for me to be informed on this topic, as my generation can change this horrible problem that is still happening presently. There are many different routes that this topic can take. Yet, I believe systemic racism is present in American policing, solely because of the numerous accounts and examples showing how prevalent this problem is in America. I think that it is important to understand the viewpoints of civilians. This does not mean that I believe a police officer's account is irrelevant. I believe that the amount of people in a community who state that racism is present weighs out the amount of police officers who say it is not present.

Methodology

To understand both sides of this argument, I will discuss how systemic racism is and is not present in American policing in three ways: physical abuse, mental abuse, and verbal abuse. First, I will discuss the effects of physical abuse from officers on people in a community as well as the effects this abuse has on the officers' themselves. Police officers are human as well, so it only makes sense for me to understand their standpoint on this topic as well. I will use this same format when discussing mental and verbal abuse as well. Therefore, I will discuss the effects of mental and verbal abuse on civilians in correlation with police officers and vice versa. This will then present whether systemic racism is stemmed from the training of police officers or if it is just an individual difference that needs to be tackled.

Definitions

Systemic racism- policies and practices that exist throughout a whole society or organization, and that result in and support a continued unfair advantage to some people and unfair or harmful treatment of others based on race (Cambridge Dictionary, 2022)

Implicit bias- The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual's awareness or intentional control (The Kirwan Institute, 2013).

Physical Abuse

Many experts argue that systemic racism is present in American policing based on physical abuse. Drew Shenkman along with many authors dispute this on a forum on Communications Law. Shenkman has received a master's in Communications and a law degree from the University of Florida (*Linking, Embedding, Licensing: Adventures in Online Content*, 2019). He is also a Senior Counsel with Cable News Network serving as a newsroom attorney (*Linking, Embedding, Licensing: Adventures in Online Content*, 2019). Yet, CNN has been accused many times in the past of being heavily prejudiced. To explain, Shenkman has received a fair education and experience in law, yet his work may be criticized because of the company he currently works with. Yet, a judgement can be made that Shenkman's work is credible to speak on physical abuse in American policing. Shenkman & Slade (2020) argue that "Black men are 2.5 times more likely than White men to be killed by police in America" predicting that, "1 in 1,000 Black men would be killed by police over their lifetime."

Shenkman & Slade (2020) includes specific examples of this including in Minneapolis where, “Black people account for only 19 percent of the population...the New York Times found they accounted for 58 percent of all police ‘use of force’ incidents...” Many officers are inherently racist for several reasons, including failure to accurately reporting their use of lethal force, commonly known as the ‘code of silence’. In Minneapolis, George Floyd’s death in police custody was not the first-time law enforcement failed to do this,

Missing from the official police narrative was the fact that one of the responding Minneapolis police officers knelt on Floyd’s neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Also missing was that three other officers stood by as their fellow officer pressed his knee on Floyd’s neck, hearing him say, ‘I can’t breathe’ multiple times, ‘Mama,’ and ‘please’ (Shenkman & Slade, 2020).

Other cases where physical abuse was present among officers rooting from systemic racism comes from Rodney King.

Four LAPD officers who delivered fierce kicks and baton beatings to King...tased him and left him seriously injured... were surrounded by a dozen or more officers, who merely watched. King, who a jury later found possessed no realistic threat to the officers, suffered serious injuries, including skull fractures, a shattered eye socket and cheekbone, a broken leg, a concussion, injuries to both knees, and nerve damage that left his face partially paralyzed.” (Shenkman & Slade, 2020).

These examples prove the amount of police officer physical abuse on civilians they casually stop, rather specifically POC. When diagnosing the value of information provided by Shenkman and Slade (2020) it is apparent that officers are inherently racist towards POC as the information provided includes real-life examples of physical abuse.

Other studies providing more data on systemic racism rooted from physical abuse comes from expert Andrew Wheeler and others. Wheeler et al. (2018) analyzed 207 Dallas Police Department officer-involved shooting incidents in reference to 1,702 instances where officers from the same agency drew their firearms but did not shoot at the suspect. The study found that African Americans are less likely than Whites to be shot. When assessing the final product of the study, it is significant to collect data on encounters in which weapons are and are not discharged. Wheeler et al. (2018) found that,

...African Americans had a higher probability of being unarmed compared to White suspects...we find that African Americans are less likely to be shot at than Whites, but they experience more incidents in which officers draw their weapon.

This example suggests in circumstances where officers were able to pull out a firearm in a police shooting, African Americans were more likely to experience incidents where officers drew weapons, therefore overrepresented. The universal finding taken from the study proves police officers are systemically racist due to the overrepresentation of African Americans rather than Whites.

Although, others argue that systemic racism is not present in American policing. The individual officer's perspective is inherently racist. Authors such as Heather Mac Donald argue this by stating how this is associated with physical abuse from the citizens rather than the officers themselves. Granted that Mac Donald has earned her B.A. in English from Yale, M.A. in English from Cambridge, and her J.D. from Stanford (*Heather Mac Donald, 2022*). Mac Donald is known for her right-leaning, conservative views on criminal justice reform and pro-police views (*Heather Mac Donald, 2022*). A resulting decision can be made that Mac Donald is qualified to

Mac Donald speak on American policing because of her renowned education and experience. To further explain, she's written many books on her position with systemic racism and policing, and despite her interests and conservative views, her publications are evident and credible to speak on how physical abuse is not present in American policing. Mac Donald (2020) begins by stating that crime and suspect behavior, not race, determine most police actions.

In 2018, African Americans made up 53% of known homicide offenders in the U.S...By contrast, a police officer is 18½ times more likely to be killed by a Black male than an unarmed Black male is to be killed by a police officer.

Mac Donald asserts a series of studies undercutting the claim of systemic police bias that was published in August 2019 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Mac Donald (2020) states that,

The researchers found that the more frequently officers encounter violent suspects from any given racial group, the greater the chance that a member of that group will be fatally shot by a police officer.

This means police shootings are not the reason that African Americans die of homicide more than Whites and Hispanics combined; criminal violence is. When gauging the statistics given by the author, it is important to note that police officers aren't discriminative; officers use excessive force in some cases because of high rates of crime and violence that occurs in the areas they work in. Other studies have also pursued with Mac Donald, one being James & Vila (2016) who created a study referencing implicit bias on police decisions to shoot by testing participants in a controlled laboratory setting. This study used a method that police departments nationwide consider an accurate proxy for measuring police decisions to shoot. Although this study may lack

authenticity, it is valid in explaining police officers standpoint on when and where they decide to shoot. James & Vila (2016) found that,

60% of Black suspects shot by the police were carrying handguns compared with 35% of White suspects...the disproportionate percentage of Black male shooting victims is at least partially a consequence of their involvement in gun assaults against officers.

It was found that police participants demonstrated implicit bias associating Black suspects with weapons. However, the police took longer to shoot armed Black suspects than armed White suspects, and were less likely to shoot unarmed Black suspects. Thus,

...implicit bias does not result in racially motivated decisions to shoot in an expected way—our police participants displayed a counter bias or ‘reverse racism’ effect when tested in a deadly force judgment and decision-making simulator (James & Vila, 2016).

To explain, the media and the public have consistently assumed that implicit racial biases will result in racially motivated decisions to shoot that favor White suspects. When calculating the importance of the study, it provides important new evidence about what motivates police decisions to use deadly force, and directly addresses a high-profile and divisive issue.

The effects of physical abuse are important in determining whether systemic racism is present in American policing. Although both sides of this argument are valid in determining this, one side favors more over the other. This being the effects of physical abuse in policing due to the numerous real-life examples of civilian deaths caused by police officers extreme use of force as presented by authors such as Shenkman & Slade (2020). Although Heather Mac Donald (2020) and others, explore how this does not determine systemic racism, suggesting crime rate determines majority of police actions. Therefore, physical abuse determines whether systemic racism is and is not present in American policing.

Mental Abuse

Mental abuse is another factor that can determine whether systemic racism is present in American policing. Authors such as Ameil Joseph explain how this connects with police officers and implicit bias. Joseph's work is mainly based in Ontario Canada, yet he has a Master of Social Work from Wilfrid Laurier University and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Waterloo (*Joseph Ameil, Holder, Faculty of Social Sciences Professorship in Equity, Identity and Transformation | Academic Director, Community Engaged Research and Relationships, Office of Community Engagement | Associate Professor, 2022*). Assessing Joseph, his work has looked at issues of social justice and violence using theoretical frameworks to look at policing and the human condition regardless of where his work is based in (*Joseph Ameil, Holder, Faculty of Social Sciences Professorship in Equity, Identity and Transformation | Academic Director, Community Engaged Research and Relationships, Office of Community Engagement | Associate Professor, 2022*). Considering his qualifications, Joseph is credible to speak on mental abuse being present in American policing. He begins by stating that the psychological effects of gaslighting on POC included a sense of alienation, disenfranchisement from the community, and distrust toward the police. Through a case study application, it is suggested that gaslighting is part of a “systemic, historical process of racism that has been used by the police and government organizations to both illegally target people of color and deny complicity in racial profiling” Joseph and Tobias (2018). It was also found,

From 2010 to 2014, it is reported that of the approximately 9,000 street checks that were conducted during that time, 12% of those street checks were Black...while White people made up 75% of the documented street checks conducted from 2010 to 2014, indicating that White people

were stopped at a rate of approximately 0.9 times, while Black people were being disproportionately being stopped at a rate of approximately 4.7 times Joseph and Tobias (2018).

This example demonstrates how street checks are a macroaggression that is indicative of a larger system of racism in Ontario. When gauging the statistics given by the research study, gaslighting emotionally and psychologically exhausts racialized and marginalized groups which can be generalized even to American policing.

Other experts have also gathered data to support this argument given by Joseph, including Reed DeAngelis who created a study that maps police violence database from 2013 to present day correlating with mental health abuse. Although some data may be outdated since the study began in 2013, DeAngelis' study is consistent because it is longitudinal and can be compared over a long period of time. When gauging DeAngelis' study, it is credible to be used in this argument. It was found that White victims are underrepresented, and Black victims overrepresented in the database. According to DeAngelis (2021),

Relative to White victims, Black victims have 60% lower odds of exhibiting signs of mental illness, 23% lower odds of being armed, and 28% higher odds of fleeing. Hispanic victims exhibit 45% lower odds of being armed relative to their White peers but are otherwise comparable.

When taking this information into consideration, DeAngelis (2021) explains as follows,

Aside from its racist inception, the policing profession continues to struggle with diversity issues, as police forces across the United States are still dominated by White men. Lack of diversity among police jurisdictions, in turn, can perpetuate an unempathetic, "us versus them" standpoint toward communities of color. Whereby POC civilians are more easily dehumanized than their White peers.

This suggests that White civilians have a higher rate of exhibiting a mental illness, and are underrepresented by police officers, yet Black and Hispanic civilians are overrepresented and are less likely to be armed at a crime scene. When comparing the statistics given by the study, it can be determined that American policing is systemically racist because of how overrepresented POC are compared to the average White male.

On the contrary, many others disagree that police officers in America are systemically racist in terms of mental abuse. Expert Jordan DeVlyder is a primary example for this. DeVlyder has interests that include studying police violence from a public health perspective. He has received a PhD in Social Work from Columbia University and a B.A. in Psychology from New York University (*Jordan DeVlyder | Fordham, 2022*). This information concludes that DeVlyder has interests primarily on mental health in most aspects, therefore his qualifications prove that he is trustworthy to speak on American policing regarding mental abuse. A judgement can be made that DeVlyder has a vested interest in mental health awareness rather than American policing, but with his qualifications, he is a credible author. DeVlyder et al. (2019) investigates potential associations between involvement in abusive policing practices and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among active-duty police officers in the United States,

On average, police officers experience more than three traumatic events every 6 months in their service...and about one third (35%) of police officers who are exposed to traumatic events develop post-traumatic stress...

DeVlyder et al. (2019) explains this effect on officers, “Approximately 10% of police officers reported having to kill or seriously injure someone in the line of duty, and these actions were significantly associated with PTSD symptoms...” The author(s) develop how police officers exhibit more signs of a mental illnesses caused by their work rather than the officers

mentally abusing civilians they stop on a day-to-day basis. These findings suggest that abusive police practices may be relevant both to the public health of communities in which officers are in and the mental health of the police officers themselves.

Other experts have found that psychological and physiological stress responses during critical incidents can shape the outcome of an incident. Authors Judith Andersen and Harri Gustafsberg created a randomized controlled pilot study consisted of training officers to apply techniques to enhance psychological and physiological control during critical incidents. Of 80 police officers, the participants were invited based on equivalent age, years of experience, physiological characteristics and expertise. Considering this was a pilot study, it may have some validity issues, but the qualitative data gathered here makes this study reliable. When gauging the data given by the authors, it is apparent in determining the effects of mental health abuse in the perspective of a police officer. It was found that,

Maladaptive stress responses during a critical incident put the officer and members of the public at risk of injury or death. Furthermore, maladaptive stress responses can negatively affect an officer's health and performance over time (Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016).

This correlates with systemic racism as follows,

Officers are often required to face threats under the least ideal conditions, including darkness, unfamiliar territory, and other distractions...When a stimulus is perceived as very threatening, an individual experiences a greater degree of Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) arousal. A severe SNS response is colloquially known as the fight or flight response (Andersen & Gustafsberg, 2016).

It is important to note that while fight or flight is a purely physiological process, psychological processes, such as threat perception, anxiety, and stress, can stimulate or inhibit the shut off of the fight or flight response. Aspects of the fight or flight response include perceptual distortions, reduced motor dexterity, and impaired cognitive function. To assess the data given, inappropriate use of force decisions during critical incidents are frequently associated with poor situational awareness arising from extreme physiological arousal, additionally the core component of improving use of force decision making is to improve an officer's ability to maintain an optimal state of sensory awareness. Andersen and Gustafsberg (2016) further this interpretation by saying,

...an officer may even look in the direction of the threat but not actually see or encode what is going on or 'may repeatedly pull the trigger of an empty weapon, misidentify innocuous items as weapons, or not see or hear innocent bystanders in the line of fire'

In the final assessment, some officers may find it hard to control these physiological responses which can have bad outcomes (ex: police killings). When taking into consideration of my authors' expertise, it is important to note the effects of mental health abuse regarding systemic racism in American policing. Although my authors' arguments are well balanced, one side seems to be favored more than the other. This being the mental health issues police officers must face in their line of duty noted by DeVlyder et al. (2019) and others. Although officers do frequently mentally abuse civilians as explained by Joseph & Tobias (2018) and DeAngelis (2021), the physiological responses in the body are natural, therefore this determines the outcome of many police actions. Yet, it is very important to consider of both sides of this argument as they are both valid in determining whether systemic racism is present in American policing.

Verbal Abuse

Many also dispute that systemic racism is present in American policing based on effects of verbal abuse as well. This is supported by research declared by Rebecca Hetey and others. Hetey works very closely with law enforcement to identify actionable strategies to improve police-community relations (Hetey, 2019). Hetey has also earned a PhD in Social Psychology from Stanford University and her B.A. in Psychology from Yale University (Hetey, 2019). This author makes clear that she may have a high interest in her work which could be potentially skewed however, she is a dependable author because of the many publications she's made in numerous journals throughout her career. When gauging the importance of Hetey, it can be noted that she is qualified to deliberate this argument. Hetey states that Blacks are more likely to be stopped by police officers than compared to Whites. This argument presents how African Americans feel towards police officers. It was mentioned,

60% of police stops were of Africans Americans, though they make up only 28% of the population of Oakland (California). Blacks feel they are treated with less respect than Whites during these routine stops...officers' language was less respectful when directed at Blacks than when directed at Whites...(Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018).

This information proves the use of verbal abuse caused by police officers as they are more verbally abusive to POC, nevertheless the author evinces this point by providing statistics from Oakland, California. To correlate with Hetey, another study organized by Ellis Monk provides demographic factors as to why officers are more verbally abusive to POC. Monk

examines relationships between social categories and social inequality and extends into topics such as social demography, health and aging (*Ellis Monk, 2022*). He has also received his PhD in Sociology from the University of California, and a B.A. in Sociology from the University of Michigan (*Ellis Monk, 2022*). To explain, Monk has specific interests in social inequality, yet his many qualifications make him a trustworthy author. When viewing Monk's expertise, he is a =qualified expert to debate on verbal abuse and systemic racism being present in American policing. Monk (2018) states compelling evidence that suggests that gradations of skin color are linked to stereotypes about dangerousness and criminality,

Skin tone is a significant predictor of having ever been arrested. Specifically...skin tone is associated with 14% higher odds in ever having been arrested. This means that the darkest-skinned African Americans...have 121% higher odds of ever having been arrested compared to the lightest-skinned respondents.

This means the darker the color your skin is, the more likely those are to have harsher treatment from officers including verbally. When weighing the statistics given by Monk (2018), it is evident that the stereotypes put on POC by police officers proves that systemic racism is present in policing. Hetey has an exchange of views with Monk, as she has other substantial information along the lines of this abuse,

...71% of Blacks reported having personally experienced discrimination or having been treated unfairly because of their race or ethnicity, compared with 30% of Whites. 84% percent of Blacks, compared with 50% of Whites, say Blacks are treated less fairly in dealing with the police...compared with 3% of Whites (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2018).

To conclude, Blacks are treated with less respect and encounter more violence with police officers during routine stops that compared to their white peers. When assessing the final

product of Hetey and Monk's research, it is important to note that officers speak to POC with less respect and more violence, suggesting systemic racism is fairly present.

Yet, experts quarrel that systemic racism is not present in American policing in terms of verbal abuse, including expert Irene Zempi. Instead, civilians will verbally abuse officers solely because of their occupational identity. Zempi has a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice at Nottingham Trent University as well as a PhD in Criminology from the University of Leicester (*Irene Zempi, 2016*). She also is a Senior lecturer in Criminology at Nottingham Trent University where she teaches issues in diversity crimes, and prejudice (*Irene Zempi, 2016*). Yet, her work is mainly based in England and Wales (*Irene Zempi, 2016*). This information reveals that Zempi is based in other countries besides the United States. Regardless of this, Zempi has provided written and oral evidence to parliamentary committees and has published widely on issues of hate crime. Diagnosing Zempi's qualifications, she is a qualified author, regardless of where she is based because of her tremendous experience in criminology.

In Zempi's study, it was stated that, "Officers perceived that certain individuals or groups were anti-police and, as a result, would verbally and/or physically attack them because of their police identity." (Zempi & Mawby, 2018). To explain, civilians will purposefully verbally abuse officers because of their occupation, while being recalcitrant. An appraisal of the current situation is evident as civilians disregard the human-nature of officers, and instead focus on what the general population thinks of them. To continue, Zempi bestows qualitative data of real-life examples provided by officers in America. A specific example is stated as follows, "On numerous occasions I've been referred to by racist names when dealing with incidents like 'get your hands off me your black bastard', public order wise or transporting prisoners into police custody. (Raymond)..." (Zempi & Mawby, 2018). Other experts concur with Zempi's argument,

including Lois James who presents a study discussing implicit bias in officers. This study includes qualitative interviews with 20 participants yet is based in an English police force (James, 2018). Hate crime literatures are used to understand targeted victimization of police officers (James, 2018). To analyze, the findings of this study discuss officers' occupational identity with other aspects of their personal identity to see how it is a trigger to hate crime victimization. It was stated that,

...the possibility that police behavior may be guided by implicit bias against social groups...is a major concern among the American public. Following high profile cases where police officers killed unarmed Black citizens, the public tends to believe the officers were driven by racial bias, while officers tend to claim they were acting on the basis of factual information indicating the person posed a threat (James, 2018).

To elucidate, police officers aren't inherently racist towards individuals verbally, instead majority of police decisions are based on suspects' actions and not their demographics. Subjectively, if citizens were educated more on a police officer's occupational identity, then there would be less verbal abuse and less of a stigma associated with all cops being substandard. James further discusses the results of the study, stating that,

officers tended to have moderate (35%) to strong (37%) bias associating Black Americans with weapons. Approximately 12% of officers had slight anti-Black bias and a further 12% had no bias. Finally, a combined 3% of the sample had anti-White bias (associating White Americans with weapons) (James, 2018).

The information exemplifies that less than a quarter of American police officers are systemically racist in terms of verbal abuse, yet this can only be resonated as an individual difference in an officer, not the entire workforce. It can be determined that not all police officers are systemically

racist, in fact it is the opposite. Many Americans don't perceive systemic problems in policing, instead they view intensifying criticism of policing practices as a repercussion on police.

When taking into consideration of my authors' expertise, it is important to note the effects of verbal abuse on systemic racism in American policing. My authors' arguments are balanced, although it evident to note that not all officers are systemically racist as explained by Zempi & Mawby (2018) and James (2018). This is simply due to a couple of individual differences and poor trained officers. Yet, it is important the see the effects of verbal abuse on citizens by those certain officers who are racist as the outcomes of this abuse are malicious as debated by Hetey & Eberhardt (2018) and Monk (2018). Therefore, both sides of this argument are both valid in reverberating whether systemic racism is present in American policing in terms of verbal abuse.

It is evident this topic is an intricate one when considering its main components: physical abuse, mental abuse, and verbal abuse. These components are important in determining in whether systemic racism is present in American policing. Much of the research conducted focuses on the effects of the discrimination on POC, as police officers seem to be inherently racist towards them. Considering this has been a crucial problem for years now, it is important that further research is conducted often. This racism is present as seen through victims of police brutality. Although there is supporting evidence wrangling this argument, the actions of police officers will not be justified simply by a couple "bad apples" in a workforce. The same goes for the extensive research found regarding mental abuse. Although officers may obtain mental health problems in their line of duty because of criminal activity, they should not mentally abuse citizens who are POC at casual police stops. This can be further interpreted with verbal abuse as

well. It was found that officers can be verbally abusive to citizens, but many Americans are recalcitrant and do not understand the full extremity and costs of being a police officer. There is an enormous amount of evidence that suggests that all officers are systemically racist, but it is important to note that this racism is rooted from individual differences that cannot be generalized to all police officers. Because of America's history and implicit bias with policing, many officers will be systemically racist, yet not all of them. Considering the research conducted by various experts, it can be concluded that systemic racism is present in American policing. Yet, further precautions need to be taken to lessen this racism rooting from physical, mental, and verbal abuse. Therefore, better training, management, and education in policing needs to be more prevalent. This in turn, can reduce the amount of those who are systemically racist in a police workforce in America, and cause less critical incidents among POC caused by officers. Police officers are meant to protect, yet people should not feel distrustful, hated, and unsafe around them. This is not a determining factor on whether an officer should treat an individual differently solely based on their race or color of their skin.

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