

Protesting Police in America: A Matter of Life and Death

Police across that nation have been under scrutiny following the slew of media coverage over the shootings of unarmed black men and other people of color within the past eight years. This reveals the systemic issue of racial policing apparent in everyday encounters. Therefore, it should not come as a surprise that there is a correlation between violent policing when mostly minority protesters are present as opposed to the lack of force used by police during mainly white protests. The differences in police action at protests are highlighted by both the Black Lives Matter movement and the recent anti-quarantine protesters.

The feeling of protesting due to unequal treatment is not a new sentiment. In 1974, Peter Eisinger [distinguished the differences in protest reasons for black and white people](#). Black people felt they had to protest to assert basic rights, or “gain attention and win demands,” from the government, however, whites, in the same study, regarded protests as unnecessary trouble-making. Unfortunately, the need for minorities to protest for equal treatment is still the case in the 21st century with the lack of justice for police shootings.

The Black Lives Matter Movement started in the wake of shootings of unarmed black citizens by police in 2013 and has continued to push for awareness by protesting and marches. However, police have pushed back. At one [BLM protest march in St. Louis follow the shooting of Anthony Smith](#), police approached protestors in riot gear with the “intent of looking menacing.” Police used “unscrupulous methods” to arrest peaceful demonstrators. Officers shot rubber bullets into the crowd and tackled those who tried to escape injury, cornered protesters, and chanted, “Whose Streets? Our Streets!” These police tactics are overly aggressive for a march, and makes it seem like the police are the ones trying to make a statement instead of the peaceful protestors. The police are purposefully harassing protestors for asserting their right to protest, which emphasizes the role of violence in their policing tactics against minorities and people of color.

When police are met with a mainly white protest group, the reaction is different. [Passionate citizens of Michigan took to the capitol building with extremely dangerous weapons to protest](#) the stay-at-home orders that have been put in place over the past couple of months. These protesters were mostly, if not all, white, and the police in the building only arrested one person despite legislators wearing “bullet proof vests” in the chamber. These protesters also “threatened Capitol police staff, press and lawmakers” over the right to work as they chanted, “Let us work.” The handling of these anti-quarantine protestors who yelled and displayed weapons, inches away from officer’s faces, is dissimilar to people protesting and marching for their right to live without fear of being shot in this country.

The difference in the policing of these events has to do with the relationship that the two different groups have with the police. Most white people trust the police because they have never experienced unprovoked targeting or violence from the police. However, due to the antagonistic police activity in minority neighborhoods, neither group trusts nor respects the other. Thus, the approach police use to watch protesters changes from promoting safety of citizens to safety of self.

Some might say the police need to keep their guard up during protests considering the riots that have happened after announcing not guilty verdicts publically. After the Ferguson, MO shooting, [rioters beat police cars into scrap metal and reduced public storage units to ash](#). This is understandably frightening for police who might feel that this is the type of behavior they should expect from all protesters. However, in [2016, NBC covered a weekend of protests](#) and most of the protests following these shootings have been peaceful. Protesters were only violent at one event and those people were arrested without incident. At another, demonstrators were blocking a highway, and an officer drew a weapon for reasons that were, “difficult to tell.” These two protest events were the anomalies out of the fourteen BLM protest marches that happened that weekend.

Most recently, policing has been apparent in areas where people are breaking quarantine rules and police have stepped in, or not. [Bill de Blasio, the Mayor of New York City, said that quarantine rules were strict](#) and that anyone who was found not social distancing after being warned by police, would be fined. However, this is not in line with what has been the norm in Central Park. CBS New York [reporters went to Central Park to find that](#) “it felt like a normal Saturday in the spring,” where most people were keeping distance, but, “not everyone.” Large crowds were spotted on Long Beach and playing team sports in Brooklyn’s Sunset Park. However, police did not make any arrests for violating social distancing in Central Park that day. This is in stark contrast to [the violent arrest of a couple of people on the street in New York City](#) who were allegedly not social distancing. This video of the arrests “showed cops throwing people against walls, tackling them to the ground . . . and punching one man in the face.” This is frankly unacceptable behavior for any nonviolent offense and considering that everyone arrested was a minority, this is in no way a coincidence. Per the Mayor’s statement, those not social distancing should have been fined. Thus, racial profiling is the only realistic explanation on why these people were targeted by police.

The contrast of these events gives more evidence to how racial policing has hurt every community in the nation. [In areas where police shootings occur, the amount of BLM protests and unrest in that area increases](#). This is an issue for the people living in the city as they are subjected to violence from police and rioters. However, it does not give is a concrete solution to this issue. In [Stephen Geron’s report](#) discussing the 21st century effects of policing, the police and city leadership fail to come to an agreement on how to police events, which causes ugly confrontations between police and

protestors. Geron attributes this to the police and city leaders not understanding “the complex nature of public protest and perhaps more importantly, understand that traditional reliance on best practices may result in increased confrontations or unintended results.” The lack of understanding from police for why protests of this nature are more passionate stems from the fact that police shootings are a matter of life and death. If police cannot approach situations where a whole group is non-threatening without pulling a weapon, why should we trust them to patrol any of our streets?

The systemic issue of racist policing in our country is not new, but it keeps resurfacing in new areas. From BLM marches, to anti-quarantine protesters, the police have shown preference for whites, which is reinforced by the violence the police use against people of color who commit minor offenses. This problem has yet to be solved by leaders, but the solution starts with bridging the gap between communities and not criminalizing being a minority in the United States.