



The Police Go Where the Crime Is

Heather Mac Donald

“... The police are my friends!” a senior citizen blurted out in the middle of a police-community meeting I attended in the South Bronx.

I’ve heard variations on this theme dozens of times from the law-abiding residents of high-crime communities. These hard-working people don’t loathe the police—quite the opposite. They understand what so many seem to have forgotten or never understood: Police spend most of their time in minority communities—that is, mostly black communities—because that is where innocent people are most being hurt by violent street crime.

To put it plainly: Police go where the crime is.

In the 75 largest U.S. counties, about 60% of robbery and murder defendants are black, even though blacks comprise only 15% of the population in those counties.

In New York City, blacks make up 73% of all shooting victims, though they are 23% of the city’s population. In Chicago in 2016, there were 4,300 shooting victims—almost all black. Among the two dozen victims under the age of 12 was a three-year-old, shot on Father’s Day, who is now paralyzed for life, and a ten-year-old, shot on Labor Day, whose pancreas and spleen were ripped apart.

This is the reality that police commanders in urban areas face every day. And every day, they get calls from law-abiding citizens in high-crime neighborhoods, begging for assistance.

So are the police friend or foe? Are they engaging in an epidemic of deadly racist violence, as we so often hear?

In 2019, the police killed 235 blacks, most of them armed or dangerous, out of 1,004 police shooting victims overall. That 25% ratio is actually less than what the black crime rate would predict, since police shootings are a function of the rate at which officers encounter violent suspects.

What about the unarmed victims of fatal police shootings?

As of June 1, 2020, the Washington Post’s database of fatal police shootings in 2019 showed 9 unarmed black victims and 19 unarmed white victims of fatal police shootings. By comparison, about 7,500 blacks die of criminal homicide a year.

You know about George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, but what about Tony Timpa? In 2016, three

Dallas police officers held the handcuffed Timpa, a white man, on the ground for 13 minutes with a knee to his back while he pleaded for help. His death was ruled a homicide, caused by the officers' physical restraint and by cocaine.

The point here is not to justify police misconduct, but to rebut the claim that questionable tactics occur only—or even disproportionately—in the case of black suspects. Indeed, it is premature to conclude that the killing of George Floyd was a product of racial animus at all, as opposed to poor training and the officer's unfit temperament.

Ideally, officers would take no one's life in the course of their duties. But in light of the number of arrests that officers make each year—around 10 million—and the number of deadly weapons attacks on officers—27 a day—it is not clear that 1,000 civilian deaths, the vast majority occurring in the face of potentially deadly attack, show a law enforcement profession that is out of control.

Can police methods be improved? Of course, they can—with more hands-on tactical training, more practice in de-escalation, and better techniques to control stress. What won't help is defunding police agencies. Officers in depleted departments who cannot get back-up when they face dangerous suspects will be even more stressed out and more at risk of making bad decisions. Response times will increase. Cash-starved agencies will train less, not more.

If the goal is to reduce crime, shifting police funding to social services is also a mistake. For decades, New York City was spending one-seventh of all government welfare dollars in America. Yet, crime started falling in the city only when the NYPD adopted the data-driven policing that has now become the norm across the country—sending officers to the areas where they are most needed. That norm is now threatened.

Sure, there are bad cops—of all races—who must be removed. That is true of every profession, and always will be. But so is this: The overwhelming majority of officers are motivated by a desire to help the most vulnerable among us.

Police are not the problem.

Racism is not the problem.

Crime is the problem.

The law-abiding citizens of high-crime communities—the ones who will pay the price of a diminished police presence—get it.

If you believe that *all* black lives matter, you should too.

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