

Police Brutality: An Overview

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ABSTRACT

Police brutality is the excessive and unwarranted use of force by law enforcement agents against individuals or groups. This includes beatings, shootings, asphyxiation, improper takedowns, taser misuse, racial abuse, torture, and unlawful killings. Amnesty International frames it as a violation of the duty to protect human rights, where police misuse powers to kill, injure, surveil, and suppress protests. The main causes and drivers of police brutality are as a result of structural and organizational factors such as: (i) police culture, lack of accountability, training and militarization, and discriminatory profiling; and (ii) individual factors like authoritarian personality, inexperience, trauma, personal problems, and stress/PTSD in officers which can increase the risk of aggressive responses. The consequences of police brutality for both individuals and communities are so grave in terms of health, economic strain, trust erosion, and social impact. It occurs in most countries globally. The paper dives into looking at the pros and cons of police brutality and proposes solutions to ending this social menace for the benefit of humanity and our society at large.

KEYWORDS: *Police, brutality, law enforcement, human rights, misuse of power, aggression, police culture, economic strain, trust erosion, social impact, global patterns, community relations, oversight and accountability, training reform, policy changes.*

INTRODUCTION

Police brutality is defined as the use of excessive, unnecessary, or unlawful force by law enforcement officers against civilians. This ranges from verbal abuse and intimidation to physical assault; torture and ill-treatment in detention, as shown in Figures 1 and 2. This is via beating, sexual violence, and coercive interrogation in police lockups and interrogation rooms; unlawful killings; and the misuse of less-lethal weapons like tear gas, kinetic impact projectiles, stun grenades, batons and rubber bullets – causing eye loss, skull fractures, burns, and deaths when used at close range or indiscriminately. At its very core is a breach of the police mandate to “protect and serve” and violates fundamental human rights, including the right to life and freedom from torture.

Police brutality has its roots and is traceable to slave trade patrols and lynching practices in the 19th century, where groups of white men enforced racial order outside the law. Similar patterns appeared globally where policing has been used to suppress

political dissent and marginalized groups. There are several interconnected key drivers/causes of police brutality, this include among others: police culture, lack of accountability, discriminatory profiling, impunity, and inadequate training and stress. The global scope of police brutality as documented include:

- The killing of George Floyd, Michael brown, and Breonna Taylor in the US.
- Extrajudicial executions in Brazil’s favelas.
- Torture and deaths in custody by Iran’s “morality police.”
- Use of excessive force against protesters in Bangladesh, Hong Kong, and Nigeria [1-6].

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Police brutality is not a new phenomenon. It is tied to how policing developed as a tool of social control, particularly against marginalized groups. The roots of police brutality can be traced to the earliest organized policing institutions. In ancient societies such as

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Rome and medieval Europe, rulers used armed guards and watchmen to maintain order, suppress dissent, and protect state authority. These early systems most often depended or relied on intimidation and violence.

1. Origins in the U.S.: 18th-19th Century

Slave patrols: In the American South, groups of white men were authorized to patrol, search, and punish enslaved people. These patrols were responsible for controlling enslaved Africans and suppressing revolts, creating a legacy of radicalized policing that influenced later law enforcement practices, as they operated outside formal legal constraints and used violence to enforce racial order. Historians saw them as direct precursors to modern policing in the U.S. South.

Lynching and mob violence: After slavery, lynching became a common extrajudicial punishment. In this case, the police failed to intervene and even sometimes participated, reinforcing the idea that violence against Black communities was acceptable.

2. In the 19th and Early 20th Centuries: Labor and Protest Policing

As police forces professionalized, they were frequently used to break strikes and suppress labor organizing. The “warrior mentality” and siege mindset developed during this period, treating protesters and working-class communities as enemies rather than citizens to protect. Police often used force to suppress labor strikes and political demonstrations. Incidents involving violent crackdowns occurred in countries such as the United States and Germany. In the US, police violence became associated with racial segregation and discrimination after the abolition of slavery. African Americans were often subjected to unlawful arrests, beatings, and intimidation, especially during the era of Jim Crow laws, e.g., the violent police response during labor protests such as the Haymarket Affair and the Pullman Strike.

3. Mid-20th Century: Civil Rights Era

Police violence was said to be highly visible during the US Civil Rights Movement. The police in Birmingham, Alabama, and Selma used dogs, fire hoses, and batons against peaceful protesters. Events such as the Selma to Montgomery marches, especially “Bloody Sunday,” showed police officers using batons and tear gas against protesters demanding voting rights. Similar patterns occurred in South Africa, Northern Ireland, and other contexts where policing was tied to racial or colonial control. In the case of South Africa, police brutality became a major feature of the apartheid regime. Security forces violently suppressed anti-apartheid activists, including during the Sharpeville massacre and the Soweto uprising, as shown in Figures 3 and 4.

Colonial governments in Africa, Asia, and Latin America also used police violence to suppress nationalist and independence movements.

4. Late 20th-21st Century: Globalization and Documentation

- **1980s-1990s:** US police departments adopted paramilitary tactics and equipment. High-profile cases like Rodney King in 1991 brought brutality into national debate, where video footage showed officers using excessive force. The incident led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots.
- **2000s-Present:** Mobile phones and social media increased documentation. Cases like George Floyd 2020, Michael Brown 2014, Eric Garner 2014 and Breonna Taylor 2020 sparked global protests under Black Lives Matter movement, as shown in Figure 5.
- **International scope:** Amnesty International has documented similar patterns in Brazil’s favelas, Iran’s “morality police,” Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Hong Kong, showing that it is not limited to the US [5,6].

Contemporary Police Brutality

Police brutality as of recent has now become a major global human rights issue. Thanks to the increased use of media coverage, smartphone recordings, and social media that have exposed incidents of excessive force worldwide. In the United States, there was the case of Rodney King in 1991 that sparked widespread protests after video footage showed officers using excessive force, which led to the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The deaths of other individuals as mentioned previously have led to intensified debates about racism, accountability, and police reform.

Furthermore, in Nigeria, allegations of police brutality have often centered on the former Special Anti-Robbery Squad. Reports of unlawful killings, torture, unlawful arrests, and extortion led to the nationwide End SARS protests/demonstrations demanding police reform and accountability that began in October 2020 and was dissolved on October 11, 2020 by the Nigerian government, as shown in Figure 6.

Why the Persistence of Police Brutality: The persistence of police brutality in many societies is due to a combination of institutional, political, social, and economic factors. It is usually not caused by a single issue, but rather by systems that allow excessive force and misconduct to continue without sufficient accountability. According to historians and sociologists, police brutality has persisted due to:

- A. Poor Training and Police (Institutional) Culture:** Inadequate training on human rights,

conflict resolution, and de-escalation contributes to police brutality. Some police institutions also develop cultures that normalize violence and discourage officers from reporting misconduct by colleagues. The “blue wall of silence,” where officers protect one another from investigation, also can reinforce abusive practices. Police culture may prioritize force and obedience over community service and human rights. Insularity, the “us vs them” mentality/framing – this is where the insular police cultures may see outsiders (including civilians, journalists, activists, or protesters) as threats rather than people they serve. This may create hostility between police and communities and can increase aggressive policing. During the End SARS protests, for example, many critics argued that sections of the police operated with a detached culture that ignored citizen’s complaints and experiences.

- B. Weak Accountability Systems:** Policy brutality persists due to lack of effective accountability mechanisms i.e., national preventive mechanisms (NPMs). In many countries, police officers accused of misconduct are rarely prosecuted or punished. This is due to the fact that internal investigations may protect officers instead of ensuring justice. According to Amnesty International, weak oversight structures and impunity encourage repeated abuses by law enforcement agencies. When officers believe they are unlikely to face consequences, excessive force may continue unchecked. The United Nations has also noted that accountability failures undermine public trust and contribute to recurring human rights violations by police forces.
- C. Legal protections:** Qualified immunity and weak accountability mechanisms reduce the consequences for officers. Qualified immunity blocks many civil suits even when rights are violated. Legal protections exist at three levels: US constitution, federal statutes, and international human rights – none eliminate brutality, but they create avenues for accountability and remedy. The UN standards states that: The *Basic Principles on the Use of Force and Firearms and Code of Conduct for Law Enforcement Officials* require force be used only when strictly necessary and proportionate. Four principles apply: legality, necessity, proportionality, non-discrimination.
- D. Institutional Racism and Discriminatory Profiling:** Police brutality is often linked to racial, ethnic, or social discrimination. In many countries minority groups and marginalized communities are disproportionately targeted. The

case of the killing of George Floyd in 2020 witnessed a global attention on racial profiling and systemic racism in policing. Data and studies show that Black (African) Americans are about 3x more likely to be killed by the police than white Americans in the US. In a similar vein, in Nigeria, the former Special Anti-Robbery Squad was repeatedly accused of targeting young people, especially youths perceived as wealthy or technologically inclined.

- E. Militarization:** Many police forces now use military-style weapons, tactics, and equipment. This militarization can increase aggressive behavior during policing operations and protests. Transfer of military equipment and tactics to police increased the capacity for lethal force. Militarized policing was more highly visible and evident during the End SARS protests in Nigeria and the protests that followed the death of George Floyd in the US, as shown in Figure 7.
- F. Political Protection and Corruption:** This is due to political leaders who sometimes protect abusive officers or use police forces to suppress dissent, protests, or opposition groups. Corruption within law enforcement institutions can also weaken justice systems and prevent reform. In authoritarian or weak democratic systems, policy brutality may persist because governments rely on force to maintain political control, e.g., as during the End SARS protests.
- G. Socioeconomic Inequality:** Police brutality is more common in poor and marginalized communities where unemployment, crime, and weak public service exist. In this case, governments can heavily rely on aggressive policing instead of addressing deeper social problems such as poverty and inequality [7-28].

SOLUTIONS TO POLICE BRUTALITY

Researchers, HRW, UN bodies, and groups like Campaign Zero frame solutions around 4 areas, which are: accountability, policy, oversight, and culture/training, as shown in Figure 8. Worthy of note is that none works alone, hence most studies point to a package approach. Solutions center around:

- 1. Accountability & Legal Reform**
 - **End qualified immunity:** This will allow civil suits to proceed when rights are violated. This is as used in Colorado, New Mexico, and others at state level.
 - **Pattern-or-practice enforcement:** DOJ investigations under 34 U.S.C. 12601 force systemic reforms in departments with widespread abuse. 12 jurisdictions were reformed by 2003.

- **Independent investigations/prosecutions:** Remove police from investigating police. New York, California, and others have created independent offices for officer-involved deaths.
- **Ban chokeholds & no-knock warrants:** This has been banned in 20+ states after 2020 and has reduced lethal force incidents.

2. Policy & Use-of-Force Standards

- **De-escalation requirements:** Need for mandate trying verbal de-escalation before force. Associated with fewer use-of-force incidents.
- **Duty to intervene:** Need for policy requiring officers to stop excessive force by colleagues. Now in policy for 80%+ of large departments.
- **Restrictive use-of-force policies:** Policies that require force be “necessary and proportional” lower killings. This is the UN Basic Principles recommended standard.
- **Body cameras + data transparency:** Cameras alone do not stop brutality, but when paired with public data they increase accountability.

3. Oversight and community Involvement

- **Civilian oversight boards with subpoena power:** In this case, independent boards can investigate, discipline, and review complaints. This is more effective when independent of police unions.
- **National Preventive Mechanisms (NPMs):** Under OPCAT (Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment), independent bodies inspect detention facilities. The UN Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture (UN SPT) urged Nigeria to establish one in 2024, but however, as at early 2025, Nigeria is still progressing but not fully compliant with Article 17 of OPCAT.
- **Early warning systems:** Track complaints, use-of-force incidents, lawsuits to flag at-risk officers before escalation.

4. Training and Culture Change

- **Shift from “warrior” to “guardian” policing:** Training should be focused on de-escalation, procedural justice, and community trust vs. combat mindset.
- **Mental health co-responder programs:** Send clinicians with police on mental health calls. This has helped to reduce arrests and force in cities like Denver and Eugene.
- **Bias and anti-discrimination training:** This addresses racial disparities. HRW notes racial bias is a driver in U.S. and Brazil.

- **Improve recruitment and retention:** Higher education requirements and better vetting reduce misconduct rates.

5. Evidence from Data

- Mapping Police Violence found states with stricter use-of-force laws had lower per-capita killings due to its use as a force multiplier for accountability. It does not curb brutality by itself, but gives communities, courts, and reformers the evidence needed to force or effect changes.
- HRW/UN reports stress that without independent oversight and published investigation data, reforms stall is due to impunity.
- UN SPT 2024: Flagged that lack of functional NPMs and legal safeguards is the main barrier in Nigeria [7, 8, 11, 27, 29, 30].

CONCLUSION

Police brutality remains one of the most persistent challenges confronting modern law enforcement systems across the world. This phenomenon is closely linked to factors such as corruption, abuse of power, inadequate training, weak accountability mechanisms, racial or social discrimination, political protection, and institutional insularity within police organizations. In many societies, officers who engage in misconduct are rarely punished, which creates a culture of impunity and undermines public confidence in law enforcement agencies. This weakens the relationship between the police and the communities they are meant to protect. Police brutality also has significant social, political, and economic consequences. It contributes to public fear, civil unrest, protests, distrust of government institutions, and violations of human rights. Communities affected by repeated police violence often become reluctant to cooperate with law enforcement, thereby reducing the effectiveness of crime prevention and public safety efforts. Globally, police brutality is illegal under U. S. and International Law, as it undermines public trust, and lacks evidence of net crime-reduction benefits. The gains in public safety comes from lawful, accountable policing, and not from excessive force. Police reforms that increase accountability while preserving effective policing show best results, when the most effective interventions are in place, such as, independent oversight, restrictive use-of-force policies, transparency, improved police training on ethical conduct and human rights, alternative response, and accountability mechanisms. Addressing police brutality requires comprehensive reforms that promote accountability, transparency, professionalism, and respect for human rights to help reduce abuse and increase public trust. More

information can be obtained in the books in [31-53] and the following related journals:
 Policing: An international Journal
 Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice
 Journal of Criminal Justice
 Criminology
 British Journal of Criminology
 Social Problems
 African Security Review
 Journal of Asian and African Studies
 Social Science & Medicine
 The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science
 Journal of Black Psychology
 American Review of Public Administration
 Journal of Commercial and Property Law
 American Society of Criminology
 American Journal of Public Health
 Journal of Political Economy

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Figure 1. Police brutality

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Police_brutality



Figure 2. Police brutality in the United States

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Police_brutality_in_the_United_States



Figure 3. Sharpeville massacre

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sharpeville_massacre



Figure 4. Soweto uprising

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soweto_uprising



Figure 5. Black Lives Matter

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Lives_Matter



Figure 6. End SARS

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/End_SARS

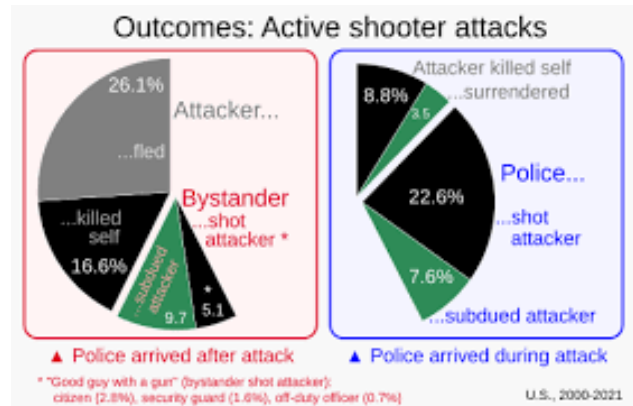


Figure 7. Lists of killings by law enforcement officers in the United States

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lists_of_killings_by_law_enforcement_officers_in_the_United_States



Figure 8. Human Rights Watch

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_Rights_Watch

