

Police Brutality Is Not Racial-Sociologists

ANN ARBOR -- About one police officer in ten in America's high-crime-rate areas uses force unnecessarily at least occasionally, a University of Michigan sociologist estimates. But those situations rarely have anything to do with racial conflict or discrimination.

Prof. Albert J. Reiss Jr., writing in the current issue of *Transaction*, a social science journal, reports on a study of police behavior in eight high-crime precincts in three unnamed U.S. metropolises.

Thirty-six men with backgrounds in law, police work, and sociology were trained and directed by Reiss to conduct the study. For eight weeks in each city last summer they rode patrol cars with policemen, stood alongside them in precinct house interrogation rooms, and watched them in police lock-ups. Each observer had permission from the city's top police administration to be present. So far as the officers knew, the observers' purpose was to record the behavior of citizens in relation to the police. This was indeed a major object of the Reiss study, but police behavior also was being watched.

THE PRINCIPAL findings: Observers recorded 3,886 recorded encounters involving police and 10,584 citizens, of whom 1,394 were suspects. In 37 encounters, involving 44 citizens, unnecessary force was employed.

There were 643 white suspects in the group, of whom 27 experienced undue use of force--a rate of 41.8 per 1,000. There were 751 Negro suspects of whom 17 experienced unnecessary force--a rate of 22.8.

"If one accepts these rates as reasonably reliable estimates of the undue use of force," Reiss writes, "there should be little doubt that the number of citizens in major metropolitan areas who experience undue use of force by the police is substantial."

Reiss notes that white suspects appear in these figures to be almost twice as liable to suffer unnecessary force as Negro suspects. But since Negro suspects make up a larger proportion of the total Negro population than white suspects do of the white population, any Negro's chances of improper treatment are more nearly comparable to a white's chances.

"If the rates are comparable, then one might say that the application of force unnecessarily by the police operates without respect to the race of an offender," Reiss writes.

ALTHOUGH some three-quarters of the officers in predominantly Negro precincts expressed prejudice against Negroes, the professor notes, "prejudice does not necessarily carry over into discrimination."

About the same proportion of white and Negro police officers--just under 1 in 10--used force unnecessarily at least sometimes, according to Reiss's findings. About two-thirds of those seen to suffer undue force were of the same race as the policeman involved.

Reiss notes the general impression that "police brutality" is a racial issue largely involving white officers and Negro citizens. This impression, he says, is generated by reports originating in organizations of Negro citizens. White citizens, who may suffer the same or more at the hands of police, have no such organized voice with which to complain.

Why do some police mistreat citizens? Reiss is inclined to blame "officer culture" rather than race culture.

All of the incidents observed involved offenders of the lower social class. Nonoffenders and middle- and upper-class per-

sons of either race were spared.

MORE THAN a third of the incidents of excessive force were recorded in the station house or the patrol car--situations which the police themselves control. Reiss quotes one policeman: "On the street you can't beat them, but when you get to the station you can instill some respect in them."

In only one of the 37 situations were witnesses present who were sympathetic to the victim. That was the only in-

cident in which a complaint was filed with the police command.

"Generally when an officer uses an excessive amount of force he does not risk complaint against him or testimony from witnesses who favor the complainant against the officer," Reiss writes.

Frequently other officers--often eleven or eight--were present but did nothing to interfere with the use of force. In some cases they promoted it. Reiss tells of one case in

a lock-up in which an officer beat a man so severely that he needed hospitalization.

"During the beating some of his fellow officers held the man up while others shouted encouragement. Though the official police code does not legitimate this practice, officer culture does."

NEITHER law nor practice define precisely how much force a policeman may legitimately use, although the general precept is that he should use only

the force reasonably believed necessary to make an arrest. Cases of force were counted in the Reiss study only if an observer saw a policeman strike a citizen with his hands, feet, or body or with a weapon. These cases were judged unnecessary only if no subsequent arrest was made, if the citizen offered no resistance, if the citizen could have been restrained less painfully, if ample other police help was available to subdue the citizen or if the force continued after the citi-

zen was subdued.

In the 44 persons upon whom undue force was used, the degree ranged from three cases in which hospitalization was required to about half the cases in which the citizen appeared little more than bruised.

"What we lack," he writes, "is evidence of a kind that permits us to calculate a rate of police misuse of force for different periods of American history. Only recently have we begun to count and report the volume of complaints against

the police. And the studies reported earlier represented the only attempt to estimate police mistreatment based on actual observation of what the police do to citizens. Police chiefs are notoriously reluctant to disclose information that would allow us to assess the nature and volume of complaints against the police."

Reiss notes that many responsible people believe brutality is on the wane, but he adds that "to move misuse from the street to the station house"

makes it less visible but really changes only the location.

Only one solution, professionalization, has been found to the serious question of making police accountable to the public without hamstringing their efforts, Reiss says. But he adds:

"Last anyone believe that professionalization will eliminate police malpractice altogether, one need only be reminded that both law and medicine regularly face problems of malpractice."

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