



Disarm the Police

Gregory Smithsimon

In the current political debates about discriminatory policing, there has been a lack of serious discussion of disarmament. Gregory Smithsimon argues that disarming the police is not only an obvious way to avoid more deaths at the hands of officers, but also a means towards cultivating more respectful relationships between the police and communities of color.

Responding to protests against repeated, blatant police abuse, politicians have met demands for meaningful change with an array of police reform proposals. Unfortunately, as criminal justice researcher Alex Vitale¹ observed in an article published in *The Nation* in 2014, most proposed reforms, like increased training and diversity, don't work. Likewise, as protesters have pointed out, body cameras are unlikely to help. The graphic videotape of Eric Garner's choke-hold murder on July 17, 2014, for example, neither prevented his death nor brought about justice. Rather than burden police with one more piece of equipment, let's get rid of the piece of equipment that most contributes to the problem: their guns.

Disarming the police is urgent. Not only would it address thousands of police shootings every year, getting rid of guns goes to the very heart of police conflict and poor relationships with communities of color.

Guns and escalation

As Mitchell Duneier (1999), Peter Moskos (2009) and others have observed, police interactions in low-income communities revolve around issues of respect. Police demand respect, civilians resent disrespect, and interactions become confrontations that escalate into mistreatment, abuse, and violence.

Take the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. By his own account, Officer Darren Wilson said he had told Brown and his companion to get out of the street. They replied that "they were almost to their destination," and Wilson responded, "What's wrong with the sidewalk?" According to Wilson, it was only after he thought Brown said something disrespectful that Wilson threw the car into reverse and reignited the confrontation with Brown that led, moments later, to Wilson shooting and killing Michael Brown (St. Louis County Police Department 2014). Even according to the account that is most generous to Wilson, respect, escalation, and confrontation drove the interaction. Wilson could have continued on his way. But the gun on his hip gave him the possibility to escalate with Michael Brown.

Such escalation is not the exception in heavily policed communities of color. In one documentary² of stop and frisk, the audio captured during the stop of an innocent pedestrian illustrates how the police create more hostile situations. After the police asked a young man

¹ See: www.thenation.com/article/we-dont-just-need-nicer-cops-we-need-fewer-cops.

² See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=7rWtDMPaRD8.

questions, they immediately shouted, “Shut your fucking mouth!” when he tried to respond. Guns give police the boldness to escalate an interaction towards violence—“You want me to smack you?”; “Who the fuck you think you’re talking to?”; “I am gonna fucking break your arm, then I’m gonna punch you in the fucking face”—because they know they can always draw their gun as a last resort.

Disarmament and safety

The common argument against disarmament is that police need guns. But for what? Most police never use them. Even in the higher-crime 1990s, nearly 95% of New York City officers had never fired their weapon in the line of duty (Rostker *et al.* 1998). And during most violent crimes—an armed mugging, for instance—the police are not at the scene, often arriving well past the event. What police do day to day—patrolling neighborhoods, substituting for an inadequate mental health system, conducting traffic stops, calming disputes, and filling out paperwork—not only doesn’t need a gun, but is safer done without one.

Take traffic stops. Currently, they can be high-risk, mutually stressful events, civilians and police each fearing the other is armed and will fire in an instant. If the police had no guns, the most lawless driver in a stolen car might... drive away, and the officer would already have reported the license plate number.

Disarming police would also change interactions with mentally ill people. A *Portland Press Herald* investigation³ found half of police-shooting victims had mental health problems. In 2014, at least 14 mentally ill people⁴ were shot by police, often after parents or other caretakers called seeking help, not lethal force. When police arrived, the victims failed to immediately follow police commands. In several notorious cases in Texas,⁵ Florida,⁶ and North Carolina,⁷ they were shot by police within seconds of police arriving at their home. In a case in Houston, police shot a mentally disturbed man who was a double amputee in a wheelchair, after he waved a “shiny object” that turned out to be a pen. As Nevada journalist and editor D. Brian Burghart concluded after a two-year effort to catalog all police shootings⁸ nationwide, “You know who dies in the most population-dense areas? Black men. You know who dies in the least population-dense areas? Mentally ill men” (Burghart 2014). Indeed, officers in Norway, where police are unarmed, revealed to researchers that a significant concern with arming police was that more mentally ill people would be killed (Hendy 2014). As recent efforts to rethink police training⁹ acknowledge (Apuzzo 2015), fatal shootings could be dramatically reduced by limiting the ready ability of police to use deadly force. The most logical limitation at hand is obvious and simple enough: disarm the police.

A disarmed civil police force

Scores of city workers perform police work without guns. Parks police write citations, often unarmed. Campus police patiently keep the peace over thousands of often drunk and rowdy college students without guns (probably because most universities want to avoid the consequences of the contentious situations that guns foster). What about venturing into a building to find evidence of wrongdoing? Building inspectors do it every day with no more than a flashlight. Paramedics and

³ See: www.pressherald.com/2012/12/09/shoot-across-nation-a-grim-acceptance-when-mentally-ill-shot-down.

⁴ See: <http://reason.com/blog/2014/08/20/mentally-ill-killed-by-cops>.

⁵ See: <http://newsone.com/3110476/dallas-cops-will-not-face-charges-shooting-death-of-mentally-ill-man>.

⁶ See: <http://newsone.com/3106390/video-of-mentally-ill-florida-man-shot-by-cop>.

⁷ See: www.cnn.com/2014/01/07/justice/north-carolina-teen-killed.

⁸ See: <http://gawker.com/what-ive-learned-from-two-years-collecting-data-on-poli-1625472836>.

⁹ See: www.nytimes.com/2015/05/05/us/police-start-to-reconsider-longstanding-rules-on-using-force.html.

firefighters go uninvited into houses, melees, protests. Token clerks, bus drivers, and social workers enforce rules, drive through dangerous neighborhoods, and assist and report on psychologically unstable people, all with no guns.

At least in New York City, a few guns at the precinct house would be only a few minutes from the rare armed threat, much as patrolling officers typically are. In remote areas, citizens would be better off if guns were in the trunk rather than on officers' utility belt. In Norway, for example, officers must obtain permission before removing their guns from their cars. This "Norwegian delay" has been credited with lower levels of shootings; It led armed forces in neighboring Denmark to organize "stop and think" training that encourages officers to withdraw from a conflict, secure the scene, regroup, and confer with other officers before seeking to resolve a dangerous situation (Hendy 2014, pp. 186–187).

Unarmed police work and live better

Efforts to reform police behavior fall short by design however if they don't fundamentally change the power dynamic between police and people who are most intensively policed. "Community policing tends to turn all neighborhood problems into police problems," Vitale (2015) notes in an Al Jazeera open editorial. Law enforcement's tools of arrest and physical force are limited ways to deal with community problems. Unarmed public-safety officers would be better able to do the work that most of them join the force to do in the first place, instead of being put into contentious situations with community residents that end badly and make no one safer. The British practice what researchers call "policing by consent" (Tilley 2008). Could today's cops do their jobs like all other civil servants do, on the basis of respect for their position, not their sidearm? Most cops could do their jobs better freed from the weapon that is a barrier between themselves and the people they are to protect.

Over a dozen countries have unarmed police—not just Britain, the best-known example, but Iceland (where a third of residents own guns, but the police patrol unarmed), Ireland (neighbor to a decades-long bombing campaign), and Norway, even after a terrorist attack against a summer camp. (Noack 2015) The disparities in civilian deaths are absurd: police here killed about 1,000 people¹⁰ last year,¹¹ while the police in Great Britain *fired* their guns three times all year—and killed no one.¹²

What's more surprising is what we forget when people say that the police need guns because they do a dangerous job: it's more dangerous because of their guns. Surveys of police who are unarmed find that their concerns include not only danger to civilians, but the psychological harm done to police who fire weapons, and a belief that arming police makes officers' jobs more dangerous (Squires and Kennison 2010). Thirty police were killed in the US in 2014, while a police officer was last killed in Great Britain in 2012. Even accounting for the UK's smaller size, a dozen cops would have died on the job in that time if they faced the rates of American police "protected" by their weapons.

Movements towards disarmament

Disarming police is a moderate path. Some groups in heavily policed neighborhoods are already calling for the more radical measure of expulsion of the police from their neighborhoods. At a large Take Back the Bronx rally¹³ in 2012, the group argued that their communities were occupied much

¹⁰ See: <http://fivethirtyeight.com/datalab/another-much-higher-count-of-police-homicides>.

¹¹ Incredibly, there are no official statistics of police shootings in the US. Media analysis has found over 1,000 per year (Fischer-Baum and Johri 2014).

¹² See: www.economist.com/blogs/democracyinamerica/2014/08/armed-police.

¹³ See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=PHqy9hGzdXg.

like a military zone. To a roaring crowd, one young woman said, “We organized our block not for reform! We don’t want no motherfucking *nicer* cops, we want to get rid of the motherfucking NYPD! So take back the ’hood, and take back the Bronx!” Movements for the abolition of the police come from diverse corners, including young community activists like Take Back the Bronx, anarchists like Disarm NYPD,¹⁴ Baltimore protesters chanting “No Cop Zone,”¹⁵ and even gang members¹⁶ optimistically imagining themselves as a political force for community control. After city council members from some high-crime districts in New York called for more cops, some of their dissenting constituents led groups like Safety Beyond Policing¹⁷ in a campaign for “No New NYPD”¹⁸ and demanded the money be spent to improve community services. These groups have not all converged. But they register people’s anger and represent momentum for social change. Campaigns for demilitarization¹⁹ have begun to bear fruit with the President’s announcement that police would no longer be able to acquire military surplus tanks, grenade launchers, and bayonets.²⁰

Addressing social issues rather than repressing populations

While criminologist and former parole officer Paul Takagi (1974) called for police disarmament as early as 1974, abolition also has long, respectable roots. Journalist Mychal Denzel Smith (2015) makes a case for eliminating the police, echoing the arguments of Malcolm X and James Baldwin, who said that “the police are simply the hired enemies of this population.” When people ask Smith, “Who is going to protect us?”, he asks “Who protects us now?” arguing that, in Black neighborhoods, the police are a source of danger, not safety, and therefore are not called on for protection. Disarmament and abolition are both strategies to direct efforts and resources towards reducing inequality and therefore violence, rather than increasing the policing of disadvantaged communities.

Some opponents to disarmament argue that it works in more social-democratic countries because a strong social safety net means there is little poverty and hence less crime. Exactly: a heavily armed police force allows a society to impoverish a segment of its citizens and still keep them in place. A society without an armed police force must move towards addressing poverty, discrimination, and social inequality peacefully, not reinforce it violently. The conservative response that disarmament might work in homogeneous, social-democratic countries but that our racially divided, high-poverty state depends on armed policing unintentionally supports Michelle Alexander’s (2010) claim that armed police are the front lines of the repressive new Jim Crow, and leaves no legitimate reason for such a heavily armed force in our neighborhoods. If we don’t need guns, what are they for? On the front line of law and order’s replacement for Jim Crow, armed police patrol African-American neighborhoods as a reminder of the deadly consequences of stepping out of line. Guns are there to discipline Black men into following a racist social order.

The protests on the streets of Baltimore, New York, Ferguson, Oakland, and beyond have been demands that we treat everyone as a citizen, not a suspect. Disarming the police is not only a step towards safer communities and safer environments for police, it’s an important goal for progress in civil rights, the rule of law, and the creation of a fully prosperous, truly democratic society.

¹⁴ See: <https://disarmnypd.org>.

¹⁵ See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Twp4HqnDpwo.

¹⁶ See: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HR9m_FP962E.

¹⁷ See : www.safetybeyondpolicing.com/campaign.

¹⁸ See: www.nydailynews.com/opinion/josmar-trujillo-1-000-cops-article-1.2121970.

¹⁹ See, for example: <https://takeaction.takepart.com/actions/hoodies-up-guns-down-demilitarize-the-police-today>.

²⁰ See: www.nytimes.com/aponline/2015/05/18/us/politics/ap-us-obama-police-equipment.html.

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