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Commentary \ **Policing, Pandemic and the American Racial Divide**

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Over the past month the United States has experienced the greatest civil unrest since 1968. Demonstrations have occurred in more in [1700 towns and cities in all 50 states](#). Outrage over the killing of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer, caught on video, drew people into the streets to protest racial injustice. To understand why this single incident provoked such a response [Thomas Mockaitis](#), Professor of History, DePaul University, examines the confluence of three factors: systemic racism, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the nature of American policing.

As the [1619 Project](#) demonstrates, racism has been woven into the fabric of American society from its foundation. African-Americans endured nearly a century and half of slavery followed by another century of legal apartheid, known as "Jim Crow." Even after the civil rights legislation of the 1960's, African Americans faced discrimination in all areas of political, economic and social life. A few key indicators reveal the nature and extent of this inequality. [Median household income for African-Americans in 2018 was just over 60% of that for White Americans](#). According to 2015 Center for Disease Control statistics, [African Americans had an average life expectancy three years lower than White Americans.](#) They also suffer from disparities in health and education.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated racial inequality in the United States. The death toll from the disease has been significantly hirer for African-Americans than for any other demographic: [62 per 100,000 as opposed to 26 per 100,000 for Whites](#) (as of June 10). Inability to work from home and reliance on mass transit increase their risk of infection. The pandemic has also had a disproportionate economic impact on people of color. Sixty percent of Latinx and 44% of African American households have experienced [job loss or decrease in wages](#) as opposed to 38% of White Households. Those still employed often work at low-wage jobs providing services, such as food delivery, that enable middle-class Whites to work safely from home.

In addition to enduring systemic racism exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, people of color in general and African Americans in particular have been disproportionately victims of police violence. African American drivers are [more likely than whites to be stopped by police and more likely to be searched](#) once they are stopped. African Americans comprise 13% of the U.S. population but [28% of the 576 people killed by police so far in 2020](#). In [99% of incidents in which police killed a person between 2013](#)

and 2019, no officer was charged with a crime. While racial disparity in policing has always existed, cellphones and social media have made it more visible. The video of officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on the neck of George Floyd went viral within a day of the incident.

Use of excessive stems from larger problem: the militarization of law enforcement. According to Radly Balko, author of *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces*, militarization began in the Los Angeles Police Department following the 1965 Watts riots. LAPD was the first to create a Special Weapons and Tactics team. Clause 1033 of the 1997 Defense Authorization Act facilitated militarization by allowing police to acquire military weapons and equipment, even when they had no need for it. In 2017, Watertown, Ct. population 22,514 acquired a "mine-resistant, ambush-protected" vehicle (MRAP). Small towns in Indiana and Michigan got "MRAP armored troop carriers, night-vision rifle scopes, camouflage fatigues, Humvees and dozens of M16 automatic rifles."

Defenders of 1033 argue that the police need all the equipment they can get to combat increasingly well-armed criminals. The data does not support this conclusion. In 2019, only 48 officers died in violent engagements with suspects, only 9 of them died in tactical situations (e.g., serving an arrest warrant). None died for lack of necessary equipment.

In addition to acquiring military hardware, the police hire a disproportionate number of former military members. While only about 6% of Americans have served in uniform, approximately 19% of officers are veterans. In the absence of a national data base on misconduct, which protestors now demand, hard and fast conclusions about the behavior of former military personnel cannot be drawn. Considerable anecdotal and some statistical evidence, however, suggests they may be more prone to using aggressive tactics than officers with civilian backgrounds. Several departments have reported a higher incidence of excessive force complaints against officers with military experience than for those without.

Training in some departments has also encouraged a military approach to policing. The "bullet-proof warrior" philosophy advocated by ex-Army ranger David Grossman epitomizes the militarized policing mindset. Grossman, who claims to have conducted workshops and training sessions for officers in all 50 states, promotes his work on his website, killology.com. He intentionally blurs the distinction between soldier and police officer, arguing that both are "sheep dogs" protecting civilians whom he describes as "sheep" from predatory criminals, "the wolves." The sheep dogs, Grossman argues, are "blessed with the gift of aggression and a love for others" (a strange blend if ever there was one) and seek to "intimidate those who intimidate others." He trains officers to

become less reluctant to use deadly force, to hone their responsive skills so that they can react more quickly without self-doubt. Useful though this skill may be for soldiers, it has no place in policing. Hesitancy in combats gets you killed; hesitancy in policing saves the lives of those you are sworn to protect. The warrior cop ethos has been criticized for promoting paranoia and a "them vs. us mentality." The Minneapolis police officer who shot and killed African-American Philando Castile in a controversial 2016 traffic stop had taken a "Bulletproof Warrior Seminar" taught by Grossman and his colleague Jim Glennon.

Militarized policing was on full display during recent protests. Demonstrations in Minneapolis began peacefully, but when some participants broke windows and vandalized squad cars, Minneapolis police used tear gas, rubber bullets, and flash-bang grenades against the entire crowd, allegedly firing indiscriminately. Journalist were arrested, and on a subsequent night of protest, armed officers allegedly fired paint canisters at residents on their porches, as one of them yelled "light 'em up." Similar incidents involving use of excessive force against peaceful protestors have been documented at demonstrations around the country.

A former police chief of Bergen, NJ noted that during protests, uniformed officers should be deployed to engage and monitor the crowd with riot police kept in reserve. In Minneapolis, he said, officers showed up "right off the bat with protective helmets and riot gear," a posture likely to inflame rather than calm the crowd. They repeated mistakes made six years ago by police in Ferguson, Missouri following the killing of Michael Brown by one of their officers. In that case an overly-aggressive response helped turn peaceful protests into violent unrest.

Across the country, police have used similar aggressive tactics. In Buffalo, NY, officers pushed a seventy-five-year old man to the ground and left him bleeding on the sidewalk. In Chicago, bystanders videoed officers dragging two women from their car in a store parking lot, even though they did not appear to be part of any protest. Others videos show officers beating people with night sticks and using pepper spray, tear gas, and rubber bullets against demonstrators who appear be marching peacefully.

The most egregious abuse took place in Lafayette Square on June 1. Park police fired pepper balls, a chemical irritant, and used aggressive tactics to disperse peaceful protestors so that President Trump could walk through the square for a photo op of him holding a Bible in front of St. John's Episcopal Church. Several days before he had fueled popular outrage by demanding tough measures against those engaging in violence. Quoting (intentionally or not) a racist slogan from the Civil Rights era, Trump tweeted: "When the looting starts, the shooting starts."

The aggressive response to unarmed people protesting police brutality contrasts markedly with the passive approach officers took to heavily-armed white militia members entering the Michigan state capital to demand the state reopen. The two episodes reveal how policing effects crowd behavior. Michigan police stood by as angry protestors got in their faces, and no violence occurred. Minneapolis police responded aggressively to the first provocation and the situation escalated.

Protests over the killing of George Floyd have led to persistent calls for police reform. The growing demand to "defund the police" does not mean abolishing departments but giving them a more restricted roll and shifting resources to social services (mental health, drug rehabilitation, etc.). Reformers also call for demilitarizing police, limiting use of military equipment and replacing the warrior ethos with a community policing model. Community policing involves developing partnerships between police and the communities they serve. Reformers also demand greater emphasis on de-escalation training, which teaches officers communications skills designed to defuse a situation before it turns violent. Other calls for change include outlawing of choke holds, eliminating police immunity from civil litigation, greater transparency through use of body cameras, and a licensing system to assure that officers dismissed for misconduct in one department cannot work in another. Implementing such reforms will require political will, resources, and time. Eliminating systemic racism will take much longer, but police reform is an important step in that process.

Thomas Mockaitis is professor of history at DePaul University, where he teaches courses in British, Modern European, and Military History. His research and writing cover violent extremism, insurgency, counterinsurgency, and peace operations. As a consultant for the Institute for Security Governance at the Naval Postgraduate School, he does presentations on these subjects at venues around the world.