

## Topic Page: [Police Brutality](#)

### Summary Article: **Police Brutality**

From *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*

Police brutality refers to excessive, unjustified, or undue use of force. Recent surveys indicate that most people agree with police officials that brutality is not a widespread problem but is instead limited to a few “bad apples.” Surveys of people who have experienced contact with the police tell a different story. The most prominent of these surveys is the 1999 Survey of Police-Public Contact, which consists of a random sample of 80,000 people. One fifth of respondents had contact with the police in 1999, half of which were for traffic violations. Most of the rest resulted from calls to the police. Of those respondents, 3% claimed that force was used and three fourths of them thought the force to be excessive. Ethnographic studies normally find even higher numbers. Part of the problem appears to be that police generally draw lines between brutality and acceptable behavior in very different ways from ordinary people.

Another part of the problem is the adoption of more aggressive policing in major urban areas under the rubrics of zero tolerance and quality of life. The ideology that equates quality of life with public order supports numerous urban trends, including gentrification, the spread of clean industries, office buildings, and chain stores. It inheres in a compelling narrative on the causes of dramatic crime rate increases over the 1960s that, in this view, caused a mass exodus of business, middle-class populations, and white people. In this view, there was too much tolerance among politicians and the courts—which supposedly had the effect of handcuffing the police—resulting in small infractions and public disorder.

Quality-of-life policing appeared in various urban areas in the 1980s and was popularized in New York City a decade later, when newly elected Mayor Giuliani and Police Commissioner Bratton promised an aggressive policing policy that would result in lower crime rates and that would make the city a place where law-abiding citizens could live free of fear as well as unpleasant sights. Quality of life, as defined above, entails a new urban aesthetic, in which aesthetic infractions such as sleeping on sidewalks or in train stations seem to require police engagement, rather than social service intervention—or tolerance. The most vulnerable populations of society—derelicts, drug-addicts, the homeless and displaced—now became its new criminal class. The movement of such people from public space, without the creation of any alternative places for them to go, amounted to a policy of constant harassment. Crime rates did in fact recede in New York City over the last decade, year after year. The model, emulated in urban areas across the country, became less controversial as a reduction in crime rates materialized. At the same time, the scant data on complaints of police brutality indicated steady increases in urban America. In New York City, complaints rose 37% from 1993 to 1994, immediately after the introduction of the quality-of-life program, as noted in 1995 by Gary Pierre-Pierre, and continued to rise throughout the decade. Amnesty International cited New York as a place where police brutality was unchecked and even encouraged. Yet a majority of the population, not only New Yorkers, appeared willing to tolerate this problem for the sake of the apparent results—less crime and more order.

### **History**

Notwithstanding the gap in knowledge about the amount of police brutality at any given time, it is an uncontroversial fact that brutality was more common before the 1970s, when police departments, especially in the South, were widely seen as willing to use excessive force against war protesters and

civil rights activists and when racist attitudes were seen as endemic. At the same time, the job of the police was not generally understood to involve controlling or reducing crime, but as responding to it. Therefore, aggressive policing could not be justified ideologically and, subsequently, the police came under greater scrutiny by the courts—which passed a series of laws that limited police discretion and extended rights to police suspects. And, more important, police departments across the country were forced to respond to demands for public accountability and community control.

Earlier dominant forms of policing included the administration of severe beating of suspects in order to secure confessions. Goon squads were also common. Their job was to patrol the streets seeking derelicts and troublemakers whose legal infractions were minor but consistent, or who were deemed undesirable—goons—by “decent” people. Such people routinely met immediate justice in the hands of the police, that is, beaten up, or told to leave town.

One reason there has been so little information about police brutality is that the police officials have been reluctant to release it. The Department of Justice has not maintained a national database of incidents of police brutality. Moreover, many questions are left answered, both about the willingness of victims to report criminal activity to the police when the police themselves represent the assailant and to what extent citizens are dissuaded from reporting police abuse because they believe nothing will come of it. Indeed, they have reason to be skeptical, since, according to a recent Department of Justice study, only 8% of citizen complaints of police brutality result in discipline of officers. Citizen review boards are still uncommon and largely staffed by political appointees. Furthermore, there is a problem of information control. The statistics on police brutality, such as they are, are not circulated in any manner that is easily accessible to the public, while major media outlets generally avoid the issue except in select cases, where an incident of brutality captures the public attention through word of mouth, alternative media, or public statements by victims and their families.

### Further Readings

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