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## **"Stick Time": On the Role of Emotional and Symbolic Rewards in the Etiology of Police Violence\***

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### **Abstract**

In the United States, the problem of police violence is frequently interpreted as a symptom of an underlying deficit, such as a lack of proper police officer training in the use of force; failure to adopt procedural justice strategies; or lack of preparation, coordination, and proper technique when responding to crowds. In this paper, the complex nature of police violence is examined from a different angle. Drawing on theory and research on non-social reinforcement, appetitive aggression, and the phenomenological foreground of violent behavior, we explore the possibility that some police officers are attracted to aggressive confrontation and that, for these officers, the use of force is associated with emotional and symbolic rewards. Further, these officers may organize their activities in pursuit of such rewards. Selected case studies are presented to illustrate these ideas. Finally, we explore the conditions that may influence the attraction to aggressive confrontation and discuss implications for police reform.

**Keywords:** police violence; police brutality; appetitive aggression; emotional and symbolic rewards of crime; Jack

### **Introduction**

During the summer of 2020, mass demonstrations broke out in major cities across the United States in response to the videotaped police killing of an unarmed Black man named George Floyd. Although the demonstrators intended to protest police brutality, many became targets themselves of police attacks, as documented by a multitude of participants and journalists.

The police response was covered in international news outlets and drew condemnation from human rights groups. For instance, a news article in *The Guardian* ran with the headline, "Protests about Police Violence are Met with Wave of Police Brutality Across US." The article documented numerous incidents of

brutality, including beatings of protestors, the violent shoving of protestors (pushing them to the ground), officers who drove their police vehicles into crowds, and the indiscriminate use of pepper spray and shooting of projectiles at close range. According to the article, "The actions have left thousands of protesters in jail and injured many others, leaving some with life-threatening injuries" (Gabbatt, 2020).

In the months that followed, various cities and watchdog groups launched investigations to better understand the aggressive and chaotic police response. The leading narrative to emerge from the after-action reports is that the police were poorly prepared for the protests and often engaged in counter-productive crowd control tactics. A *New York Times* article summarized over a dozen after-action reports and concluded that they were "strikingly similar" in that they told a common story (Barker et al., 2021). In particular, the reports generally faulted police agencies for lack of preparation, lack of oversight, and lack of training in crowd control and conflict de-escalation. In addition, several reports highlighted the militarized response of the police as a contributing factor. When police arrived wearing riot gear, as if prepared for battle, this tended to infuriate protestors and escalated confrontations.

Thus, the leading narrative focused on alleged police deficits; that is, deficits in planning, preparation, and technique. The implication is that the aggressive police response resulted mainly from inept and disorganized reactions to stressful street encounters. This narrative may not tell the whole story, however. For example, this narrative does not adequately explain the surprising nature of some attacks. Following an exhaustive review of video footage of such incidents, a team of journalists concluded that the police violence was frequently unprovoked: "In dozens of videos, officers' decisions to escalate violence seemed to come out of nowhere, catching crowds off guard" (Buford et al., 2020).

In addition to a lack of planning and preparation, an alternative insider account suggests that some of the police violence may have also resulted from officers' deliberate pursuit of aggressive confrontation. Following the heavily criticized response of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) to the protests, a local television news host interviewed Cheryl Dorsey, a retired LAPD sergeant. In the exchange, the interviewer references the long history and experience of the LAPD with protests over police brutality:

INTERVIEWER: You worked – again, you just mentioned it – during the Rodney King riots. What kind of training did you get, if any, for protests and mass demonstrations?

DORSEY: We always had de-escalation training, and we trained constantly for these kinds of incidents... [but] we see officers who are drunk with power, who know they are being recorded and don't care, who are getting in what they call here on the LAPD a little "stick time." 'Cause there are officers who live for that. (CBS Los Angeles, 2020)

"Stick time" is a euphemism for hitting a suspect/citizen with a police baton, although it may reference physical force by the police more generally. The allure of stick time has been referenced in certain news stories on police brutality, including cases in which officers have bragged about their successes in kicking and beating protestors (Elfrink, 2018; Murphy, 2018; Sperti, 2021). The allure of stick time has also been mentioned in the academic literature. In his book on police culture, Crank (2015:191) briefly describes how opportunities to hurt "the bad guys" – outside the bounds of the law – can have strong moral and emotional appeal for some police officers: "They are beckoned by its sensuous allure, the seduction by dark places, secret places, and violent revenges, to be princes of the city." Likewise, in a brief statement, Stinson (2020:79) observes that "coercive force may hold seductive qualities for police who confront individuals who fail to acknowledge an officer's authority."

Despite this recognition, the attraction to stick time is an aspect of policing that remains largely unexplored. Crank (2015:190) suggests at least two possible reasons for this neglect. First, the darker aspects of policing are difficult to study due to their secretive nature. Second, the attraction to stick time may be disturbing to contemplate because it conflicts with "rational, high-minded conceptions of police ethics." Yet a third possibility, which is the focus of the present paper, is that the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of stick time remain underdeveloped. In the absence of a suitable conceptual framework, it may be difficult to comprehend or even articulate the idea that ordinary people may derive pleasure from aggressive confrontation, and that employees of the state, in particular, may organize their activities in pursuit of such pleasure.

To facilitate the examination of stick time, especially its seductive allure to some police officers, we draw insights from several strands of theory and research, including theory and research on non-social reinforcement, appetitive aggression, and the phenomenological foreground of violent behavior. We then apply

these insights to certain acts of police violence; in particular, acts involving the use of force "that cannot be accounted for under the auspices of lawful necessity in the line of duty" (Stinson, 2020:14) and that also appear to be motivated, at least in part, by the "pleasure of the fight." To illustrate the plausibility of this application, we describe several illustrative cases (drawn from news reports, investigations, and court cases) which highlight the emotional and symbolic rewards that some police officers derive from the use of force. Although it is likely that only a small percentage of police officers engage in violence of this type, the actions of such officers can have a disproportionate impact on the public's level of confidence in the police. Finally, we explore the conditions that may increase the attraction to aggressive confrontation, consider the role of race and gender, and discuss the potential implications for police reform.

### **Explaining the Potential Allure of Police Violence**

When conducting research on the emotional and symbolic rewards of violence, criminologists have mainly focused on the street offender population (e.g., Katz, 1990; Wood et al., 1997). To our knowledge, this line of research has not been applied to law enforcement officials. Yet the theory and research described below suggests that the reward potential of violence is not limited to street offenders. Nor does it appear that such rewards are limited to individuals suffering from psychopathology (Elbert et al., 2017). In fact, the potential to derive pleasure from aggressive behavior may be universal and may afflict any individual who is involved in a pursuit that involves regular exposure to violence, including those involved in street offending, wartime combatants, or even police officers. It may be part of the human condition and may have its roots in the process of evolution.

### **Non-Social Reinforcement**

As Stinson (2020:16) observes, "There have been few applications of criminological theory to the study of police violence or even, more generally, police misconduct." This fact is likely due to the unique challenges involved in the study of police violence. For instance, it is difficult to measure the excessive use of force and obtain the data required for inferential statistics. This challenge, in turn, inhibits theory testing. Yet despite these challenges, there is general agreement that the leading criminological theories have potential to explain police violence. Such theories, after all, tend to be general in scope and are designed to explain crime and violence in their various manifestations.

Social learning theory—widely regarded as a leading social-psychological theory of crime—has been identified as one promising candidate (Stinson, 2020). Social learning theorists argue that crime and violence are learned like any other behavior, and that such behavior can be explained in terms of differential association, definitions, differential reinforcement, and imitation (Akers, 1998). In essence, learning theorists assume that the odds of participating in deviant behavior will increase or decrease to the extent that individuals associate with criminal versus conformist others; come to define deviant behavior as acceptable versus unacceptable; experience deviant behavior as rewarding versus punishing; and observe others engage in deviant versus conforming behavior, respectively.

At least two studies have formally tested the ability of social learning theory to explain police misconduct. Based on survey data collected from 504 police officers, Chappell and Piquero (2004) constructed measures of deviant peer association, definitions favoring misconduct, and peer reinforcement related to three types of misconduct, including the acceptance of gifts, theft from a crime scene, and excessive force. The results of regression analyses indicated that these measures were associated with an increased likelihood of receiving citizen complaints, although they performed inconsistently across equations depending on the type of misconduct that was examined. In a separate study, Quispe-Torreblanca and Stewart (2019) find evidence of a peer association effect on police misconduct. In particular, following the transfer of problem officers into police working groups, they observe an increase in the existing officers' receipt of citizen complaints.

Like most tests of social learning theory, these studies of police misconduct focused on social reinforcement or other social aspects of learning. Yet, for the purpose of the present study, it is important to stress that social learning theory also recognizes the role of *non-social* reinforcement. Non-social reinforcement refers to the direct pleasure or reward that stems from participation in deviant acts, such as the neurophysiologic "high" that follows from the ingestion of illicit drugs (Akers, 1998). While the direct neurophysiologic rewards of drugs and alcohol are widely recognized, a small body of research indicates that non-social reinforcement is also relevant to serious street crime. Further, this body of work has led several theorists to conclude that street offending "may be rewarding in and of itself, independent of any extrinsic

rewards such behavior may produce" (Grasmick & Bursik, 1990:857) and that non-social reinforcement could be a major motivating force behind criminal behavior (Gove & Wilmoth, 1990; Wood et al., 1994, 1997).

In a study that was specifically designed to study the role of non-social reinforcement in street criminality, Wood and his colleagues (1997) obtained reports from experienced offenders who were asked to describe what it feels like to engage in various criminal acts. For these individuals, acts of crime and violence were frequently associated with pleasurable sensations such as being "intensely alive," "pumped up," "on a high or rush," and a sense of power and control. According to the authors, it appears that pleasurable sensations of this sort are very important motivations for crime, especially among individuals who engage in habitual violence (see also Wood et al., 1994). They conclude that processes of non-social reinforcement deserve further attention in the criminological literature.

### ***The Phenomenological Foreground of Violence***

A related area of research involves the qualitative examination of the sensuous attractors and foreground factors associated with deviant behavior. This line of work can also help shed light on the potential allure of police violence. In his pathbreaking book, *Seductions of Crime*, Katz (1988) departs from the traditional criminological focus on background risk factors and examines deviant behavior as seen through the eyes of the offender. This approach uncovers the sensual dynamics — including emotional and symbolic rewards — that entice individuals to pursue illicit activity.

For example, Katz (1988) draws on offender accounts and other materials to highlight the excitement, sense of adventure, and "sneaky thrills" experienced by those involved in property crime. Likewise, individuals who intimidate others or commit assault are shown to revel in their sense of power, control, and moral righteousness — especially when they believe they have been provoked in some way. These behaviors and experiences are seductive, in part, because they allow individuals to transcend the boundaries of conventional social life. In the words of Lakhani and Hardie-Brick (2020:95), "The adrenaline rush, the intense excitement, and sense of adventure provide a series of emotional transformations and a powerful contrast to the usual, safe, predictable, and all-too-familiar mundane reality."

Although most criminological research remains focused on the role of background risk factors, a number of studies have reported findings that are consistent with Katz's observations (for a summary of this research, see Polizzi, 2020). One example involves the research on non-social reinforcement described earlier (e.g., Wood et al., 1997). Likewise, the work of Lakhani and Hardie-Brick (2020) suggests that violent extremists are often driven, at least in part, by the promise of excitement, thrills, and sense of adventure that surrounds the commission of terrorist acts.

As with research on non-social reinforcement, the extant phenomenological research has focused mainly on street crime or on crimes committed against the state. This body of work therefore does not address the relevance of such research to those who are entrusted to enforce the law and protect the public. However, in a brief passage, Katz (1988) discusses violence committed by military interrogators, which may have some parallels to police violence. Katz draws on the American military experience in Vietnam and describes how intelligence officers, in an effort to "keep the pressure up," often got caught up in their emotions while interrogating Vietnamese peasants, leading to routine physical assaults on the interrogees.

### ***Appetitive Aggression***

Psychological research on appetitive aggression can further our understanding of the potential appeal of violence. Researchers in this area observe that aggressive behavior can be reactive or instrumental in nature, but a third category — appetitive aggression — involves aggressive behavior that is driven by the pleasure of attacking and fighting (Elbert et al., 2017; Even-tzur, 2017; Nell, 2006). Findings in this area indicate that appetitive aggression is not a mere psychopathological aberration; that is, the behavior is not limited to individuals who suffer from personality disorders (see also Buckels, Jones, & Paulhus, 2013; Paulhus & Dutton, 2016). Rather, in certain settings, this behavior is commonplace:

In many scenarios of modern warfare, the vast majority of ordinary combatants report that with some habituation and repetition they enjoy violent aggression, including killing, mutilation and torture, and finally seek out opportunities to perpetrate it. The phenomenon manifests itself in other noncombat contexts as well. Clinical interviews with gang members in townships of South Africa showed very high levels of appetitive aggression. (Elbert et al., 2017:120).

Given the prevalence of appetitive aggression, several researchers in this area conclude that it must be an intrinsic and universal feature of human psychobiology (Elbert et al., 2017; Nell, 2006). It is likely to be associated with reward centers in the brain, which reinforce the attraction to attacking and fighting, and appears to arise in circumstances that involve frequent or continuous violence.

There are several possible reasons for the development of appetitive aggression. First, during the course of human evolution, appetitive aggression may have conferred a survival advantage (Nell, 2006). Activities related to survival, such as hunting for large animals or engaging in battle with rival tribes, were difficult and dangerous. "Only those people who learned to enjoy the associated proximal stimuli — tracking, chasing the prey, the death struggle, the scent of blood — had an advantage" (Elbert et al., 2017:128).

Second, in circumstances that involve frequent violence, appetitive aggression may function, in part, as a coping mechanism that helps people avoid feelings of helplessness. By cultivating an enjoyment of aggression and violence, people are able to approach challenging situations with a sense of power and safety. Further, a high level of appetitive aggression may blunt any empathy that perpetrators might otherwise have for their victims, thereby allowing them to avoid feelings of guilt or remorse (Elbert et al., 2017).

### ***Naming the Phenomenon: "Appetitive Police Aggression"***

To summarize the key points reviewed above, the research literature on non-social reinforcement and the phenomenological foreground of violence provide support for the idea that people can be attracted to aggressive confrontation. In fact, they may find such behavior to be enticing or seductive, as the perpetration of violent behavior is frequently associated with a range of pleasurable emotional sensations. Violence, in particular, is frequently associated with the experience that one is "on a high or rush," "pumped up," and "powerful" (Wood et al., 1997:352). The experience of such rewards is likely to reinforce violent behavior and may contribute to habitual offending. Moreover, psychological research on appetitive aggression highlights an entire category of violent behavior that is motivated by the pleasure of attacking and fighting. In addition, this line of the research highlights appetitive aggression as a universal phenomenon—with deep evolutionary roots—found in both combat and noncombat contexts.

These insights appear to be directly relevant to certain manifestations of police violence. In particular, as suggested by various cases we describe below, some acts of police violence appear to be driven, in whole or in part, by the pleasure of aggressive confrontation, especially with individuals who are seen to challenge police authority, such as noncooperative citizens, those who protest against police misconduct, and criminal suspects. Hereafter, we refer to this manifestation of police violence as "appetitive police aggression." Naming such phenomena can help bring them to awareness and facilitate identification and discussion (see Mahoney, 1999).

There are, of course, a variety of individual-level factors that may contribute to police violence in general, such as job-related stressors and trauma (DeVylder et al., 2019); attitudes and beliefs that reflect a cynical view of the public and that support an aggressive policing style (Miller, 2015); and certain personality traits (Stinson, 2020). Further, some police violence may be primarily reactive or instrumental in nature. And these various factors and motivations may overlap. Our focus, however, is on the relatively neglected acts of police violence that, based on existing documentation, appear to be involve, in whole or in part, an emotional or symbolic attraction to aggressive confrontation (i.e., appetitive police aggression).

Appetitive police aggression appears to have all the characteristics associated with appetitive aggression in general. Rather than being a mere psychopathological aberration, appetitive police aggression may be more prevalent than commonly assumed and may be social in nature, involving small groups of officers who engage in serious misconduct. And consistent with the research described earlier, there is evidence that it is associated with pleasurable emotional sensations and that some police officers actively pursue opportunities to engage in it. The experience of positive emotional sensations, in turn, may help to reinforce police violence and contribute to habitual involvement. In short, "brutal acts of violence can be emotionally exciting and addictive" (Lakhani & Hardie-Biack, 2020: 94), and police violence may be no exception.

As stated earlier, it is likely that only a small minority of officers actually engage in appetitive police aggression. Recent research on the group nature of police misconduct, in general, indicates that small groups of deviant officers ("crews") are often responsible for a disproportionate share of serious police misconduct. For instance, a study of Chicago police officers, which spanned several decades, identified 160 possible crews, involving less than 4 percent of all Chicago police officers. The members of these crews accounted for "approximately 25% of all use of force complaints, city payouts for civil and criminal litigations, and police-involved shootings" (Jain et al., 2022).

At times, crew members coordinate their activities with the explicit intent to engage in misconduct – a phenomenon that is also evident in some of the documented cases of appetitive police aggression that we describe in the next section. Although a small percentage of officers appear to be involved in such crews, it is important to note that deviant officers can influence the behavior of other officers and can thus exert a negative influence on police culture, as suggested by research on police networks (Ouellet et al., 2019; Quispe-Torreblanca & Stewart 2019).

In addition, as discussed below, there is reason to believe that a larger number of officers endorse gratuitous violence against citizens, even if they do not participate directly in appetitive police aggression. They may do so by expressing glee or excitement over the idea of police aggression, or upon hearing reports of such behavior from fellow officers. This aspect of the phenomenon is also of concern, as the existence of social support for appetitive police aggression may inspire some officers to actively pursue it.

### **Illustrative Cases of Appetitive Police Aggression**

To illustrate the plausibility of the above arguments and to document the existence of the phenomenon, selected cases of appetitive police aggression are presented below. Before proceeding, it is important to stress that we do not seek to conduct a formal test of the arguments raised above. Such a test is beyond the scope of the present paper. Moreover, to our knowledge, no readily available data source includes measures allowing for a rigorous test. At this early stage of inquiry into the nature of appetitive police aggression, we believe it is important to establish its existence and outline the broad contours of the problem, especially in light of an apparent reluctance to contemplate the phenomenon (see Crank, 2015). Further, a consideration of illustrative “real life” cases can shed light on various elemental dimensions of appetitive police aggression, including the scope of the problem, its social nature, and the level of peer social support that may exist for such behavior. Knowledge of these elemental dimensions can help guide future research on the topic.

### **Investigation of the Los Angeles Police Department**

In the early morning hours of March 3, 1991, an amateur photographer videotaped the beating of a young black man, Rodney G. King, following a high-speed police chase in Los Angeles, California. The videotaped footage of the incident begins with Mr. King on the ground, after he had been tased multiple times by the police. After Mr. King tried to rise up at various times, officers struck him again and again with their batons. In the end, Mr. King received 56 baton blows and was kicked in the head and body, before he was handcuffed and dragged on his stomach to the side of the road to await an ambulance.

After the videotape was broadcast by various television stations, public outcry led to the formation of an independent commission to examine excessive use of force by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The commission identified numerous areas of concern within the LAPD, including a serious problem with excessive force, the existence of a “significant number” of officers with unacceptable attitudes toward the use of force, lack of accountability for problem officers, a culture tainted by racism and bias, and other issues (Christopher, 1991, p. x).

According to the commission, “At Pacifica Hospital, where King was taken for initial treatment, nurses reported that the officers who accompanied King . . . openly joked and bragged about the number of times King had been hit” (Christopher, 1991:15). Further, following a review of messages that LAPD officers had transmitted over their mobile computer terminals (“Mobile Digital Terminal” [MDT] system) over a 16-month period, the commission identified numerous communications between officers that highlighted their attraction to aggressive confrontation (Christopher, 1991:49-54). These messages were transmitted from all geographical areas of Los Angeles and included messages of the following type:

They give me a stick they give me gun they pay me 50G:s to have some fun.

A full moon and a full gun makes for a night of fun.

If I find it itl be ois [officer involved shooting] time. God I want to kill something oh so bad.

[W]e got a little physical with a [name omitted] on Columbus . . . it was fun . . . we had to teaching him a little respect . . . for the police . . . hahahahaha . . . it was fun.

Ti was fun..but no chance to bust heads..sorry.  
Oh well, maybe next time.

It's been fun lately. Almost shot a dummy, had a good fight an the pursuit. Ha sick huh.  
OK its ur turn for a pursuit . . . I love them.

According to the commission, "The MDT transmissions make clear that *some officers relish the excitement of a pursuit, and some view a pursuit as an opportunity for violence against the running suspect*"<sup>1</sup> (Christopher, 1991:53; emphases added). The commission further noted that the officers freely transmitted these disturbing MDT messages, knowing that their communications could be monitored by supervisors. This fact led the commission to suggest that the culture of the LAPD was tolerant of such inappropriate attitudes toward the use of force.

### **Stick Time in the St. Louis Area**

Similar police communications have surfaced in more recent cases of police brutality. Following a violent clash between St. Louis County police officers and protesters in 2014, complaints of excessive police force led to the release of footage from the officers' body-worn cameras. In such footage, officers can be heard bragging to each other about their successes in beating, kicking, and using pepper spray against protesters. As one officer exclaimed to a fellow officer, "Some guy was fucking kneeling down and I kicked him like there was no fucking tomorrow" (Murphy, 2018). When another officer asked his partner if he got in any "stick time" during the action, the partner replied, "No, but I went through a whole can of mace." The officer smiled (Rivas, 2018). Yet another officer is heard saying, "I got a couple good licks in on somebody" (Murphy, 2018).

In a second case occurring in the St. Louis area, the fatal police shooting of a Black motorist sparked street protests, which become known as the Stockley protests. In eager anticipation of the protests, a group of three St. Louis police officers exchanged text messages about the protestors. According to a federal indictment, in their messages the officers "*variously expressed disdain for the Stockley protestors and excitement about using unjustified force against them and going undetected while doing so*" (United States District Court, 2018; emphases added; see also Elfrink, 2018; Friedersdorf, 2018). The text messages included communications of the following type:

The more the merrier!!! It's gonna get IGNORANT tonight!! But it's gonna be a lot of fun beating the hell out of these shitheads once the sun goes down and nobody can tell us apart!! ! !

This shit is crazy ..... but it's fucking AWESOME too!

And this one is easy because we both are good, going rogue does feel good . . . .

Did everyone see the protestors getting FUCKED UP in the galleria???? That was awesome!

A lot of cops gettin hurt, but it's still a blast beating people that deserve it. And I'm not one of the people hurt, so I'm still enjoying each night . . . .

At least two of these officers were later involved in the arrest and subsequent beating of a Black individual at a Stockley protest. The individual sustained permanent injuries as a result of being kicked and struck with a police baton. Unbeknownst to the attacking officers, however, the individual was an undercover police detective who had been walking with protestors and monitoring them for criminal activity (his White partner was also arrested, but not beaten). The unprovoked beating of the detective led to a criminal investigation, multiple trials, and ultimately convictions and sentences for officers connected to the incident (Mack, 2021; Murphy, 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Police pursuits bear some resemblance to hunting behaviors, which are highlighted in the appetitive aggression literature as having properties that are intrinsically rewarding.

### **The Kettling of Protesters in Charlotte**

In June of 2020, after demonstrators took to the streets of Charlotte, North Carolina to protest racial injustice, police officers reportedly used a crowd control strategy that involves corralling and encircling the crowd, thereby eliminating protestors' ability to exit (Speri, 2021). This controversial strategy is sometimes referred to as "kettling." The incident was followed by complaints that the police deliberately trapped peaceful protestors and used unnecessary and indiscriminate force on the crowd.

Although Charlotte officials challenged the allegations, videos from police cameras suggest that the attacks by police officers were deliberate, premeditated, and motivated—at least in part—by the pleasure of using force against the crowd:

[Police officer:] As soon as they get up on Fourth, we got 'em bottlenecked now, Rorie's squad is gonna step out and hammer their ass. . . We're gonna fuckin' pop it up.

In another video, officers are heard laughing at having forced protestors "on the run." In yet another, an officer reacts to police firing pepper balls at the crowd: "That was awesome!" (Speri, 2021)

### **Pepper Balls in Evanston, Illinois**

In December of 2020, Northwestern University issued a public statement expressing concern over the threat of violence that student protestors had faced from police officers in Evanston, Illinois (Saraf, 2020). The incident in question involved the police response to a student-led protest that took place in October of that year. Initial news reports highlighted the police department's account of events, which focused on disturbances caused by the protestors, including property damage, setting off fireworks, and pointing lasers and throwing objects at police (Saraf, 2020; Villagomez, Rosenberg-Douglas, & Fry, 2020). Further, despite student reports of the widespread and indiscriminate use of pepper spray, police initially refuted the claim, stating that tear gas was never used and that any smoke seen in photos of the protest was due to the fireworks set off by protestors.

Yet police documents that were later released in response to a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request tell a somewhat different story. These materials confirm the use of pepper spray and also illustrate that some of the officers reaped emotional rewards from the use of such weapons against the protestors:

In a group chat between NIPAS officers released via FOIA by Northbrook PD, multiple officers expressed their glee with using pepper balls and made jokes about further harming protestors. One officer wrote, "My trigger finger was jittering. As much as a shattered kneecap would a been nice, alas I was not ten feet away. Pepper ball did just fine." (Harrison & Watson, 2021)

### **Officers Applaud Violence on Facebook**

Over the course of an 18-month period, The Plain View Project examined approximately 2,900 public Facebook accounts belonging to individuals who had been positively identified as current or retired police officers from eight different police departments in the US (Hoerner & Tulsy, 2019). The project eventuated in the 2019 release of a database containing thousands of disturbing posts made by the officers, including posts that contained racist imagery and memes, used dehumanizing language, scoffed at due process, and applauded gratuitous violence against citizens — especially "liberals," protestors, and criminal suspects. Such posts were found in the Facebook pages of approximately 20 percent of current officers and 40 percent of retired officers. A number of these posts were made by officers in leadership positions, including police sergeants, lieutenants, and captains. In total, about 5,000 disturbing posts came from 3,500 officers across the nation.

A news article in *The Guardian* noted that the disturbing posts and comments included "a surprising number of endorsing people driving cars into protestors" (Gabbatt, 2019; as noted earlier, police violence of this type later occurred during the summer protests of 2020 [Gabbatt, 2020]). Such posts included photos of vehicles being driven into crowds of protestors, with police officers expressing encouragement or satisfaction:

I can't wait until someone has had enough, and just plows through these idiots!  
Every one of these assholes should have been run over.  
Now you're talking!!!  
Love it. It's about time we show them who is running the show.

Although it may be tempting to dismiss these posts and comments as mere hyperbole, a follow-up investigation by Injustice Watch, a non-profit newsroom, found that many of the officers who made offensive



posts had a history of complaints for excessive force or civil rights violations: For instance, "of 327 officers in Philadelphia who posted troubling content, more than a third — 138 officers — appeared to have had one or more federal civil rights lawsuits filed against them, based on name, badge number, and other corroborating details. Of that group, 99 ended in settlements or verdicts against them or the city" (Hoerner & Tulsy, 2019).

### ***Reflections on Stick Time in an Online Forum***

A public thread in a national online forum for law enforcements officers – discovered by the first author – bears the title, "Stick Time." The thread is ostensibly devoted to officers' preferences for various styles and models of police batons, but several posts express delight over the ability to inflict pain with these weapons<sup>2</sup>:

It's been a few years, but the one thing I like about an aluminum PR-24 vs a plastic or wood baton is that pleasant ringggggggg they make when they hit bone (ie: kneecap). Nothing quite like it!  
[accompanied by a smiley face emoji]

The night stick is the real deal to cause pain, though [accompanied by a winking emoji]

In his discussion of the allure of violence, Katz (1988:106) describes how this allure extends to the weapons of violence: "Just to have these things, to hold them, to inspect them, and observe them swiftly introduced into the moment is exciting." It is perhaps not surprising, then, that other posts in the thread referenced the strong emotional attachment that some officers have to their batons, with one officer describing how he memorialized his weapon:

[M]y weapon of choice the Winchester . . . 26" of pure striking power. I have loved it. It's a real bruiser. I have used it at least a dozen times at work.

When he retired, my pappy gave me his old rosewood billy club – about 12". I carried it until I retired . . . Today, the billy is restored, polished and on the wall.

### ***Implications for the Nature, Scope, and Prevalence of Appetitive Police Aggression***

Given the secretive nature of police culture and lack of good data, the true extent of police violence remains unknown. As Stinson (2020) observes, most police misconduct goes unreported and never comes to the attention of the public. At the same time, available data indicate that police violence occurs frequently enough to be of national concern. For instance, in a national survey of police officers conducted by the Police Foundation, 22 percent of the respondents agreed that officers in their department "sometimes, often, or always" use more force than necessary to make an arrest. Only 16 percent of the respondents said the officers in their department "never" use excessive force (Weisburd et al., 2000).

Even less is known about the prevalence of appetitive police aggression, or how much of a role it plays in the overall problem of police violence. Nevertheless, there are at least two reasons to believe that it is a noteworthy aspect of the problem — one that may involve police officers across the nation. First, the illustrative cases described earlier not only help document the existence of appetitive police aggression but also indicate something about the scope of the problem. Rather than being limited to a few problem jurisdictions, or to a particular point in time, these cases span many years and multiple jurisdictions across the country.

Second, these illustrative cases highlight the social nature of appetitive police aggression. While it may be tempting to dismiss appetitive police aggression as a personal problem afflicting a few isolated bad actors or "rotten apples," three critical observations lead us to conclude that such a dismissal would be premature. First, in terms of direct involvement in appetitive police aggression, several of the illustrative cases described earlier appear to involve "rotten pockets" of bad actors (Sherman, 1974), or what Jain et al. (2022) refer to as deviant police "crews." Second, most of the cases involve communications in which officers appear eager to share with like-minded colleagues their anticipation of, or actual involvement in, appetitive aggression, thereby implying the expectation of peer social support. In multiple cases, the communication exchange between fellow officers indicates group endorsement if not direct group involvement in appetitive police aggression. Third, the social media posts described earlier—involving thousands of officers across the nation—point to a tolerance

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<sup>2</sup> Screenshots available from the author on request.

and even enthusiasm for appetitive police aggression more broadly, even if most of these officers are not directly involved in such behavior (see also Hoerner & Tulsy, 2019; Lieber, 2020). These three observations lend credence to Crank's (2015) assertion that the attraction to violence may be an element of police culture.

### **Factors that May Promote or Discourage Appetitive Police Aggression**

The research literature on non-social reinforcement and appetitive aggression highlight factors that may promote or discourage the pursuit of violence for pleasure. It is reasonable to conclude that these same factors may also promote or discourage appetitive police aggression. By identifying the factors that influence appetitive police aggression, it may be possible to design approaches or strategies to reduce this manifestation of violence.

### ***The Neutralization of Empathy***

It is possible that individual-level factors may influence the degree to which police officers are attracted to aggressive confrontation. Although limited, existing research on non-social reinforcement suggests that some individuals are more likely than others to derive intrinsic pleasure from acts of crime and violence. Brezina and Piquero (2003) suggest that such individual differences are likely to be a function, at least in part, of social learning factors. Individuals who associate with deviant peers, who are socialized to define deviant acts in a certain way, and who have not internalized strong moral beliefs should be especially receptive to the emotional rewards of offending. For instance, among individuals who have internalized strong moral beliefs (or definitions), emotional rewards that accompany aggression are likely to be counteracted by self-punishment in the form of guilt or shame. In contrast, individuals who lack strong moral beliefs should be in a position to enjoy, more fully, the direct emotional rewards of aggression.

Likewise, research on appetitive aggression suggests that moral considerations may influence the attraction to violence, although this line of research focuses mainly on the role of dehumanization and the neutralization of empathy. The historical record, along with classic research in social psychology (Milgram, 1974), indicates that the human capacity for aggression and cruelty is universal. At the same time, the capacity for compassion is also believed to be universal and likely evolved from kinship bonds that promoted human survival. According to Nell (2006), the co-existence of these two human capacities contributes to an oscillation between fascination and horror: on the one hand, there exists a potential fascination with violence and cruelty; on the other hand, there is the potential to experience horror at the sight of another individual suffering — especially an individual that is seen as undeserving of pain or that the observer can relate to. Initial fascination with violence or cruelty can switch to horror, and for most people, "sadistic fantasies are overridden by the tendency to be revolted by depictions of sadistic behavior and empathize with victims" (Paulhus & Dutton, 2016:117).

Appetitive aggression is made possible when the potential for horror is short-circuited, and perhaps the most effective means for doing so is to "turn off" empathy for the victims of violence. Studies of combatants in World War 2, Vietnam, and in various civil wars not only provide evidence of "combat exhilaration" or "combat addiction" (Even-tzur, 2017) but indicate that empathy for the victims of war is typically modulated by a process of dehumanization:

[The perpetration of appetitive violence] means the regulation of empathy: the dehumanization of the prospective victim, for example by seeing the enemy as a "monkey" or "rat" . . . is a typical example of how to turn off empathy. Similarly, when gang members target a victim, it does not matter who that is, so long as the victim is a member of an enemy group, an out-group individual . . . someone fundamentally "other"—for example, homosexual, rival gang member, or other ethnic group. (Elbert et al., 2017:129-130)

In the eyes of perpetrators, the dehumanized fall outside the universe of moral obligation and no longer elicit compassion or are seen as deserving of legal rights (Fein, 1979; Owusu-Bempah, 2017). It is possible to identify several interrelated aspects of modern policing that may facilitate this process of dehumanization, neutralize empathy, and thereby increase the likelihood of appetitive police aggression against citizens. These aspects include the "war on crime" metaphor and associated us-versus-them mentality; the dehumanization of racial minorities; peer tolerance; and a lack of accountability.

### ***The War on Crime Metaphor***

The "war on crime" metaphor has been described as one of the most successful government metaphors in recent American history (Simon, 2002) and has been used by political and law enforcement

leaders to frame the national crime problem for over half a century. As several scholars have noted, the war on crime metaphor encourages a process of dehumanization very similar to that observed in actual military conflicts (e.g., Cooper, 2015; Coyle & Young, 2022; Dubber, 2001; Owusu-Bempah, 2017; Simon, 2002; Walker, 2015). Under this metaphor, law enforcement officials are depicted as soldiers in combat and are defined as the protectors of the dominant social order, while members of the community who pose as threat (or who look like they may be a threat) are defined as the enemy:

The [war on crime] metaphor suggests that we are fighting a foreign enemy. This leads people to demonize criminals as people apart from the rest of us. . . Additionally, the us-versus-them attitude encourages police officers to regard suspects as people who do not have the same rights as other U.S. citizens. (Walker, 2015: 20)

Simon (2021:2) provides a detailed ethnographic account of how early socialization in the police academy encourages cadets to embrace the war on crime metaphor, prepare for battle against an unpredictable enemy, "conceptualize their enemy as a man of color, and to think about violence as a moral necessity"<sup>3</sup> (see also Bell, 2018). The war on crime metaphor also reinforces the myth of the "warrior hero," which links manhood to hunting, fighting, and war (Nell, 2006). Especially for male recruits, the war on crime metaphor may be appealing because it offers an opportunity fulfill the warrior role and affirm one's masculinity (Simon, 2021). In addition, the war metaphor implies a communal march against an enemy, which may be attractive because it tends to generate strong in-group solidarity and a sense of moral righteousness (Cooper, 2015). As Hedges (2003:9) observes, "once we sign on for war's crusade" we tend to see ourselves on the side of angels and become all the more capable of brutality.

These dynamics may help to explain the communal nature of appetitive police aggression. The cases of appetitive police aggression reviewed earlier came to light because the officers involved freely communicated their glee and excitement with fellow like-minded officers. These communications, which confirmed their attraction to aggressive confrontation, may have been rewarding because they also affirmed the officers' masculinity and good standing in a "righteous" in-group.

### ***The Dehumanization of Racial Minorities***

The process of demonization that is encouraged by the war on crime metaphor has particular relevance to racial minorities. As Walker (2015:20) observes in this context, "To a great extent, this tendency to demonize has encouraged racial and ethnic stereotypes and aggravated the racial polarization of U.S. society" (see also Simon, 2021).

Owusu-Bempah (2017) highlights the complex arrangement of structural and cultural conditions that have contributed to the dehumanization of Black people throughout American history, especially in relation to criminal justice. According to Owusu-Bempah, the legacy of slavery and discrimination has contributed to Black Americans' social, political, economic disadvantage relative to White citizens and, in turn, has contributed to disproportionate levels of street crime within Black communities in contemporary America. Yet, rather than interpret Black crime as a consequence of structural inequality, it is often viewed as "proof" of Black people's inherent criminality, which further perpetuates the dehumanization of Black Americans.

This process of dehumanization means that Black people are viewed by many Americans – including law enforcement officials – as existing outside the universe of moral obligation. Their demonized status is then used to justify the militarized over-policing of, and use of force against, minority communities. Further, Owusu-Bempah (2017) summarizes research showing that racial bias is a problem among police officers that such bias is correlated with the use of police force against Black male youth (see also Goff et al., 2014).

In this context it is noteworthy that, in the illustrative cases of appetitive police aggression reviewed earlier, racist language is a persistent theme (see Christopher, 1991; Hoerner & Tulsy, 2019; Mack, 2021). For instance, during the criminal trial of an officer who had been involved in the beating of a Black undercover detective during the Stockley protests, prosecutors noted the officer's use of racist language in text messages – in addition to messages expressing excitement and glee over police violence. These messages compared Black protestors to monkeys and used other dehumanizing language (Mack, 2021).

In short, the processes of dehumanization that are encouraged by the war on crime metaphor, and that have long been targeted at racial minorities, are likely to neutralize empathy for "civilians" and may

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<sup>3</sup> Some police departments have been criticized for using photos of Black individuals for target practice during firearms training, including photos of local arrestees (Shepard & Torres, 2015; see also Dowd, 2022).

therefore increase the likelihood of appetitive police aggression. Conversely, policing metaphors and practices that discourage dehumanization should reduce the likelihood of appetitive police aggression. For instance, some police officers have described how a community-oriented "neighbor mindset" can cultivate an advantageous empathy, which reduces both the need and desire for the use of force:

Police are not warriors — because we are not and must not be at war with our neighbors. . . As I got closer to my neighbors, I developed an empathy that has served me better than any gun or vest. . . A funny thing happened on the way to becoming a better rookie cop by being a better neighbor: I became a better person. This is the opposite of what wars do. Wars make monsters of us all.<sup>4</sup>  
(Skinner, 2020)

### **Peer Tolerance and Lack of Accountability**

As described earlier, known cases of appetitive police aggression involve communications between like-minded officers. The emotional and symbolic rewards associated with stick time may depend, in part, on its communal nature ("pleasure is shared"). Thus, when officers perceive a shared attraction to, or tolerance of, stick time among their peers, we would expect an increase in the likelihood of appetitive police aggression. Further, existing cases point to the anticipation and excitement that officers have expressed over opportunities to engage freely in stick time while going undetected (see United States District Court, 2018; Elfrink, 2018; Friedersdorf, 2018). Such cases suggest that, even if there is no change in the overall attraction to stick time, it may be possible to curtail appetitive police aggression with measures designed to increase monitoring, supervision, and accountability. In addition, it may be possible to develop evaluation and reward structures that encourage police practices that are antithetical to appetitive police aggression, such as the problem-solving and community-oriented practices described by Skinner (2020).

If future research confirms these anticipated links between the war on crime metaphor, processes of dehumanization, peer tolerance, lack of accountability, and appetitive police aggression, then this would provide further justification for alternative approaches to policing and related reform efforts.

### **Conclusion and Directions for Future Research**

There exists a common social reluctance to acknowledge the phenomenon of appetitive aggression because it conflicts with our myths and ideals (Even-tzur, 2017). For example, we expect soldiers to be brave, loyal, and to engage in self-sacrifice as they pursue a noble fight. During wars that have broad public support, we hold them up as heroes. Yet those who know war, and who have experienced the dark side of combat, often recognize that they can never match this ideal. This problem appears to be especially acute among soldiers who have experienced combat exhilaration or combat addiction (Even-tzur, 2017; Hedges, 2002).

Likewise, we expect police officers to exhibit many of the same noble traits and thus there exists a similar reluctance to confront the reality of appetitive police aggression (Crank, 2015). However, for a number of reasons, this issue deserves further attention, discussion, and scientific scrutiny. First, as described earlier, the phenomenon of appetitive police aggression may be more common than previously believed. Second, it may contribute to the overall problem of police violence. Third, the phenomenon may help to explain the modest impact of traditional police reform efforts which, in the public sphere, continue to be described as disappointing (see Sullivan, 2022). To address police violence in a truly comprehensive manner, it may be necessary to acknowledge the existence of appetitive police aggression and address the factors that contribute to its existence. And fourth, the phenomenon of appetitive police aggression is deserving of further attention because it is likely to have a disproportionate impact on public trust.

When police violence results from a lapse in judgement, lack of knowledge, or lack of proper training, then it may be rendered understandable or at least comprehensible to the public. And it may be possible to restore the public's confidence in the police, especially if sincere steps are taken to prevent its future occurrence. However, appetitive police aggression is likely to be especially corrosive to police-community relations as it tends to confirm people's worst suspicions about the police.

Related to this point, although the phenomenon of appetitive police aggression has received little attention from scholars, it has not been lost on affected segments of the public. For instance, during the 2020

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<sup>4</sup> The "guardian" role also offers a contrast to that of the warrior – one that emphasizes problem-solving policing and protection for vulnerable citizens. The guardian role is also attractive to many officers. Yet as Simon (2021) observed during police academy training, cadets were informed that one must first become a warrior before one can become a guardian.

protests that followed the murder of George Floyd, the police response in San Jose, California was widely criticized after demonstrators videotaped an officer dressed in riot gear who taunted the crowd by rocking back and forth with a projectile gun, licking his lips, and grinning. The officer's apparent glee and excitement drew complaints from a protestor, who shouted, "This is funny to them. They're having a blast. They have smiles on their faces!" The officer replied by shouting, "Let's get this mother fucker!" He then shot a projectile into the crowd at close range (Noyes, 2020).

It is hoped that the present paper will provide the initial conceptual tools needed to facilitate future discussion and research on appetitive police aggression. To pursue further research in this area, it should be noted that criminologists need not start from scratch. For instance, they could borrow methodological approaches that have been successfully applied in research on non-social reinforcement, appetitive aggression among combat veterans, and the phenomenology of street crime. For instance, self-report survey methodology has helped reveal the powerful and enticing emotional sensations experienced by individuals involved in street crime (Wood et al., 1994, 1997; see also Brezina, 2009; Brezina & Piquero, 2003).

It may be natural to assume that, when participants are asked about their motives for engaging in particular criminal acts, they will mainly offer self-serving responses rooted in convenient rationalizations and justifications. But this is often *not* the case, especially when research participants have been assured anonymity and confidentiality. In self-report studies on the emotional rewards of street crime, participants freely describe their participation in illicit acts (including serious acts of violence) as thrilling and exciting, being associated with a "rush" or a "high" (e.g., Agnew, 1990; Molinet & Brezina, 2022; Wood et al., 1997). And they do so with considerable regularity. In fact, survey research of this type suggests that the expectation of intrinsic reward is a major motivating force behind criminal and delinquent involvement. We may find the same to be true of certain manifestations of police violence.

Finally, self-report research of this type should allow us to determine if the experience of appetitive police aggression is influenced by the extent to which officers embrace the war on crime metaphor, participate in the dehumanization of perceived "out-groups," anticipate positive reactions from their peers, or other factors. Such knowledge could inform police reforms efforts.

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