

Journal of Theoretical & Philosophical Criminology

ISSN: 2166-8094

Jtprcrim January/February 2022: 36-38

Police Use of Excessive Force Against African Americans: Historical Antecedents and Community Perceptions. By Ray Von Robertson and Cassandra D. Chaney. New York: Lexington Books, 2019. 193 pp.

Review:

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Police brutality against African Americans has a long and bitter history that is firmly embedded in America's cultural identity. Ray Von Robertson and Cassandra D. Chaney's book, *Police Use of Excessive Force Against African Americans: Historical Antecedents and Community Perceptions*, provides an in-depth look at the current state of policing in America and its unbreakable link to white supremacy. They achieve this by conducting a comprehensive study that gathers both quantitative and qualitative data on African American college students' perceptions of members of law enforcement.

Robertson and Chaney's first chapter focused on the history and legacy of dehumanization suffered by people of African descent, notably the United States. The authors argue that it is essential to consider the legacy of inhumane treatment of people of African descent for two reasons. First, according to both authors,

...although scholars are beginning to increase their coverage of the brutal treatment of African Americans by law enforcement, this topic has generally received little scholarly attention. Second, there is a lack of adequate attention to remedying from disparate treatment of African Americans by police officers, which emerges from a larger subtext of marginalization (3).

One of the major strengths of this books, is the author's ability to intertwine quantitative and qualitative data on African American college students' perceptions of members of law enforcement to solidify their arguments throughout the text. Robertson and Chaney informed their readers at the beginning that their research heavily focuses on how law enforcement is viewed by African American college students attending a historically Black college/university (HBCU) in the South.

- First, African American college students have a long history of not only activism but also strained relations with police (2).
- Second, African American college students are members of an age cohort that has recurrent negative encounters with police (2).
- Third, both African American male and female college students report contacts with police as stressful, with male affirming contacts with police as stressful, with males affirming contacts with police as more stressful than their female counterparts do (2).
- Lastly, a concentration of African American collegians is warranted because research has shown that middle class African Americans are more likely to report positive views of the police than working class African Americans of lower socioeconomic statuses (3).

In chapter two, Robertson and Chaney provide a historiography of the events that shaped America's contemporary position on African Americans and police brutality. The authors argue that by looking at the policing mechanisms of slavery, specifically the role of the plantation overseers, there is a historical link that has laid the basis for today's American police brutality and other forms of state sanctioned violence towards the Black body (21). It is within the section titled, *Plantation Overseers: Laying a Foundation for American Police Brutality*, where Robertson and Chaney provide an extensive overview of the *Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade* and its connection to the early development of laws that were made to "govern enslaved Africans and protect the investments of those who own them" (22). Robertson and Chaney state that "the first slave patrol was in the colony of Carolina in 1704, followed by patrols in Virginia 1727, North Carolina and Tennessee in 1753, Georgia 1757, and existed in some form in each state in the United States by the end of the 1700s" (23). They go on to argue that even after slavery, "racialized social control of Black bodies" was frequently sustained through vigilantism and lynchings, with law enforcement officers commonly involved (25). The concept of *racialized social control of Black bodies* is repeated throughout chapter two as the authors provide historical accounts of American race riots as well as the bloody history of high-profile cases of police brutality and killings of African Americans, particularly Black men and boys.

Chapter three captures the discussion of existing research that shows Blacks and Whites have different perceptions of police officers, despite the authors' claim that there is "limited research on how race and education may influence these perceptions" (49). Through both quantitative and qualitative findings from their analysis of African American college students' perceptions of members of law enforcement, Robertson and Chaney were able to uncover the factors that shape perceptions of police, which they argue were not the same as how White/European Americans perceive law enforcement (49). First, the authors were able to ascertain whether race, gender, and "education create different realities among a demographic that only accounts for 13percent of the population in the United States by using a phenomenological approach to collecting data on African American college students' perceptions of members of law enforcement (49). From a phenomenological framework, Robertson and Chaney were able to provide an extensive overview of the narratives of 30 college students as it related to the following question: "What if any differences exist between how Black male and female college students perceive members of law enforcement" (49). By asking 12 probing questions regarding their perspectives of police, Robertson and Chaney generated themes that were pervasive throughout the narrative offered by their participants, which were then explored inside the body of chapter four.

In chapter four, "College Students' Perceptions of Members of Law Enforcement," Robertson and Chaney present to their readers a qualitative and quantitative approach and findings from their research study. The quantitative analysis was conducted on the following questions on a scale of 1-10, with 1 being lowest and 10 being the highest:

1. How much do you trust the police (55)?

2. (question 5) Do you believe the police treat Black people better than, equal to, or worse than White people (55)?
3. (question 8) Has a police officer ever used an excessive amount of force on you (55)?
4. (question 9) Has a police officer ever used an excessive amount of force on someone that you know (55)?

According to the quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, constructive change in policing in America in relation to people and communities of color is needed. For example, when regarding the question 5 (Do you believe the police treat Black people better than, equal to, or worse than White people?) according to Robertson and Chaney, “participants unanimously believe the police treat Black people worse than they treat White people (56). The strength of this chapter comes from the authors' findings, which both do an exceptional job of presenting the approach they used to acquire their data.

In chapter five, *Discussion*, Robertson and Chaney present a thorough analysis of their findings. This chapter examines what they both describe to as the five W's (Who, What, When, Where, and Why) in terms of how law enforcement is viewed (97). Both researchers concur that the "what" refers to “the circumstances in which minorities interact with police;” the "when" refers to “the times when minorities interact with police;” the "where" refers to the location where “minorities and law enforcement meet;” and the "why" refers to the rationale behind “police claims that they target Blacks and other racial minorities” (97). This was quickly followed by the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative responses to the above-mentioned question.

In conclusion, *Police Use of Excessive Force Against African Americans: Historical Antecedents and Community Perceptions* is an excellent resource for understanding the role of dehumanization of the Black body in the history and legacy of police violence against people of African descent in America. Anyone interested in the history or contemporary study of race and policing should read this book. Another major strength of this book is that it offers practical solutions for reducing police violence, which has strained relationships between African Americans and other communities of color for centuries.

References

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