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***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: Blackness and Policing**

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The reality of tension between the African American community and the police is an ongoing problem with deep historical roots. In *Police Use of Excessive Force Against African Americans: Historical and Community Perceptions*, Ray Von Robertson and Cassandra D. Chaney explore the gross maltreatment and wanton violence perpetrated against African Americans throughout history and by present-day law enforcement agents. In addition to this, the authors conduct a survey of self-identified African American college students in order to ascertain their wide-ranging perceptions of the police.

Robertson and Chaney (2019) justify the methodological choice to qualitatively study African American college student perceptions of police in four ways. First, African American students have a storied tradition of activism and troubled police relations. Second, as people who are in their late adolescent years and early twenties, college students are part of the age cohort with the most frequent police interactions. Third, African American college students often view police interactions as a source of stress. Finally, middle-class African Americans are more likely to have positive views of law enforcement than their working-class counterparts. The authors astutely note that while college attendance is not direct evidence of *current* middle-class status, college tends to be the predictable gateway to *eventual* middle-class status, thus surveying African American college students is a way to ascertain the views of the future middle class.

The book commences with intriguing discussion of race and crime. For instance, there is an analysis of how the reality of the intraracial nature of crime does not allay baseless white fears of impending interracial victimization. Additionally, black children are irrationally perceived by law enforcement to be older than they are in actuality. Most interestingly, there is also commentary on how black victims of murderous violence at the hands of police, such as Tamir Rice, and also black victims who are killed by non-law enforcement actors, such as Trayvon Martin, are either largely ignored or subjected to cultural anathematization, which reflects widespread anti-black racism. The authors perceptively point out that white victims, such as those who were fatally killed in the 2012 Sandy Hook massacre, are treated with considerably more compassion.

In their discussion of the history of American policing, Robertson and Chaney (2019) articulate how modern law enforcement has unfortunate similarities to slave patrols in the South. They also highlight how police departments in the North were responsible for regulating African Americans who fled the South after escaping slavery. This section of the book is significant principally because it highlights how policing is far from an inherently moral institution. Rather, policing is merely a reflection of the moral state and legal culture of the society being policed. Therefore, an immoral and inhumane society will necessarily produce policing that enforces that immorality and inhumanity. Intriguingly, the text also highlights some of the pivotal racialized episodes throughout American history, such as the East Louis Race Riot of 1917, which commenced as a direct result of violent interaction between citizens and the police, as well as the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, the Rosewood Massacre of 1923, and the Detroit Race Riot of 1943.

Of the many useful qualitative findings in the study on African American college students' perceptions of police, perhaps the most illuminating was that 27 percent of respondents demonstrated conflicting thoughts about law enforcement. In other words, the students had positive and negative perceptions of the police as being both protectors and aggressors. This is particularly fascinating as it shows that while there is a fraught relationship between the police and the black community, it is only a simplistic analysis that presumes black people are incapable of recognizing the necessity and legitimate function of law enforcement in modern society. Such an analysis also erases some of the historical truth about black people supporting robust policing at times in order to combat entrenched crime (Fortner, 2015). At a time when support for black lives and policing are jejunely framed as being diametrically opposed, it is necessary to have nuanced analyses that show that people can understand the importance of police, while still holding law enforcement accountable for anti-black racism, murderous violence, and malfeasance.

In closing the text, Robertson and Chaney (2019) point out six recommendations to improve criminal justice. First, the ending of the war on drugs is recommended, which they argue has been part of the reason for mass incarceration. Second, white supremacists in law enforcement must be identified and cashiered. Third, officers must come from the communities in which they reside. Fourth, increased accountability must become the norm. Fifth and finally, dashboard and body-worn cameras ought to become nonnegotiable components of police work. Ultimately, these recommendations are intellectually sound, and the authors are cautious to acknowledge that the points presented do not constitute an elixir to instantaneously resolve the myriad issues within American criminal justice. These recommendations, which are similar to some of those expressed in the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21<sup>st</sup> Century Policing (2015), would meaningfully improve policing if taken seriously and implemented.

The recommendations provided at the end of the text, in addition to the qualitative data that give an insight into the thinking of African American college students vis-à-vis policing make this worthwhile reading. Furthermore, the authors must be commended for their sober approach to criminal justice reform. While the text does highlight the smorgasbord of racial issues that policing faces, the authors maturely and judiciously eschew engaging in the performative "burn it all down" radicalism that has become *en vogue* in current discussions surrounding policing and criminal justice more broadly. The recommendations provided show that the authors believe that policing can be markedly better than it is today.

Texts that can vividly portray the immoral similarities between slave patrols and some of the worst parts of contemporary American policing, while still recognizing the glaring necessity of law enforcement, are essential. Also, such recognition of the historical and contemporary wrongs of policing, while establishing the necessity of the police in modern society, may help to build legitimacy of the police (Tyler, 2004) in the eyes of many in black neighborhoods. Members of law enforcement are mandated to protect and serve, but the behavior of law enforcement officers throughout history has made it completely rational for African Americans to be skeptical of this ostensible goal. By recognizing the historical and contemporary failures of law enforcement, the modern perceptions of

law enforcement by young black people, and following a wise path towards criminal justice reform, there is hope for less conflicting thinking with respect to the police in the future.

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