

## Racism and Police Brutality in America

Cassandra Chaney · Ray V. Robertson

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**Abstract** What, if any, changes have occurred in the nation's police departments 21 years after the Rodney King beating? To answer this question, this study examined findings provided by the National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project (NPMSRP). An additional goal of this study was to examine how the public generally perceive police and how race and racism shape this discourse. To answer this secondary question, we examined narratives provided by 36 contributors to the NPMSRP site. The following two questions were foundational to this study: (1) What do findings from the NPMSRP suggest about the rate of police brutality in America? (2) How do individuals perceive the police department, and what implications do these perceptions hold for Black men in America? In general, fatalities at the hands of police are higher than they are for the general public. Grounded theory analysis of the data revealed that individuals perceive members of law enforcement in the following ways: (a) contempt for law enforcement, (b) suspicion of law enforcement, (c) law enforcement as agents of brutality, and (d) respect for law enforcement. Supporting qualitative data are presented in connection with each of the aforementioned themes.

**Keywords** Black · African-American · Critical race theory · Discrimination · Police brutality · Race · Racism · Rodney King

What, if any, changes have occurred in the nation's police departments 21 years after the Rodney King beating? To answer this question, we examined findings provided by the National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project (NPMSRP). In addition, we examine how the public generally perceive police and how race and

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C. Chaney (✉)  
College of Human Sciences and Education, School of Social Work, Child and Family Studies,  
Louisiana State University, 323 Huey P. Long Field House, Baton Rouge, LA 70803-4300, USA  
e-mail: cchaney@lsu.edu

R. V. Robertson  
Department of Sociology, Social Work and Criminal Justice, Lamar University, Beaumont, TX, USA  
e-mail: rvrobertson@my.lamar.edu

racism shape this discourse. To answer this secondary question, we examined narratives provided by 36 contributors to the NPMSRP site.

The topic is important for two reasons. First, although several scholars have examined the increasing rate of police brutality against Blacks (Dottolo and Stewart 2008; Elicker 2008; Kane and White 2009; Smith and Holmes 2003; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006; Staples 2011), we are aware of no studies to present findings from the NPMSRP nor discuss the implications of these findings in light of the Rodney King beating by members of the LAPD, which occurred in 1991. This endeavor is especially important given the negative stories related to “bad cops” that have come to light within the last decade (Boyer 2001; Savali 2012). Second, this study examines how the public generally perceive the police, per the findings presented by the NPMSRP. Given King’s position as being the “face of police brutality in America” and thus influence how the public generally perceive the police, the following two questions were foundational to this study: (1) What do findings from the NPMSRP suggest about the rate of police brutality in America? (2) How do individuals perceive the police department, and what implications do these perceptions hold for Black men in America?

In the section that follows, we place the goals of our study within the empirical literature. We begin by discussing the effects of racism and discrimination on Black men in America. Next, we discuss police brutality against Black men. After this, we discuss the general portrayal of Black men in the media. Then, we discuss the relevance of Derrick Bell’s critical race theory (CRT) to our current discussion. Lastly, we will provide a conceptual framework that integrates racism, police brutality, and the CRT on which this study is built.

## Review of Literature

*Racism and Discrimination* According to Marger (2012), “racism is an ideology, or belief system, designed to justify and rationalize racial and ethnic inequality” (p. 25) and “discrimination, most basically, is behavior aimed at denying members of particular ethnic groups’ equal access to societal rewards” (p. 57). Defining both of these concepts from the onset is important for they provide the lens through which our focus on the racist and discriminatory practices of law enforcement can occur. Since the time that Africans were forcibly brought to America, they have been the victims of racist and discriminatory practices that have been spurred and/or substantiated by those who create and enforce the law. For example, The Watts Riots of 1965, the widespread assaults against Blacks in Harlem during the 1920s (King 2011), law enforcement violence against Black women (i.e., Malaika Brooks, Jaisha Akins, Frankie Perkins, Dr. Mae Jemison, Linda Billups, Clementine Applewhite) and other ethnic women of color (Ritchie 2006), the beating of Rodney King, and the deaths of Amadou Diallo in the 1990s and Trayvon Martin more recently are just a few public examples of the historical and contemporaneous ways in which Blacks in America have been assaulted by members of the police system (King 2011; Loyd 2012; Murch 2012; Rafail et al. 2012). In *Punishing Race* (2011), law professor Michael Tonry’s research findings point to the fact that Whites tend to excuse police brutality against Blacks because of the racial animus that they hold against Blacks. Thus, to Whites,

Blacks are viewed as deserving of harsh treatment in the criminal justice system (Peffley and Hurwitz 2013). At first glance, such an assertion may seem to be unfathomable, but that there is an extensive body of literature which suggests that Black males are viewed as the “prototypical criminal,” and this notion is buttressed in the media, by the general public, and via disparate sentencing outcomes (Blair et al. 2004; Eberhardt et al. 2006; Gabiddon 2010; Maddox and Gray 2004; Oliver and Fonash 2002; Staples 2011). For instance, Blair et al. (2004) revealed that Black males with more Afrocentric features (e.g., dark skin, broad noses, full lips) may receive longer sentences than Blacks with less Afrocentric features, i.e., lighter skin and straighter hair (Eberhardt et al. 2006).

Shaun Gabiddon in *Criminological Theories on Race and Crime* (2010) discussed the concept of “Negrophobia” which was more extensively examined by Armour (1997). Negrophobia can be surmised as an irrational of Blacks, which includes a fear of being victimized by Black, that can result in Whites shooting or harming an African-American based on criminal/racial stereotypes (Armour 1997). The aforementioned racialized stereotypical assumptions can be deleterious because they can be used by Whites to justify shooting a Black person on the slightest of pretense (Gabiddon 2010). Finally, African-American males represent a group that has been much maligned in the larger society (Tonry 2011). Further, as victims of the burgeoning prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, and enduring racism, the barriers to truly independent Black male agency are ubiquitous and firmly entrenched (Alexander 2010; Chaney 2009; Baker 1996; Blackmon 2008; Dottolo and Stewart 2008; Karenga 2010; Martin et al. 2001; Smith and Hattery 2009). Thus, racism and discrimination heightens the psychological distress experienced by Blacks (Robertson 2011; Pieterse et al. 2012), as well as their decreased mortality in the USA (Muennig and Murphy 2011).

*Police Brutality Against Black Males* According to Walker (2011), police brutality is defined as “the use of excessive physical force or verbal assault and psychological intimidation” (p. 579). Although one recent study suggests that the NYPD has become better behaved due to greater race and gender diversity (Kane and White 2009), Blacks are more likely to be the victims of police brutality. A growing body of scholarly research related to police brutality has revealed that Blacks are more likely than Whites to make complaints regarding police brutality (Smith and Holmes 2003), to be accosted while operating a motorized vehicle (“Driving While Black”), and to underreport how often they are stopped due to higher social desirability factors (Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006). Interestingly, data obtained from the General Social Survey (GSS), a representative sample conducted biennially by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago for the years 1994 through 2004, provide further proof regarding the acceptance of force against Blacks. In particular, the GSS found Whites to be significantly (29.5 %) more accepting of police use of force when a citizen was attempting to escape custody than Blacks when analyzed using the chi-squared statistical test ( $p < 0.001$ ) (Elicker 2008).

Police brutality is improper and unjust. So a plausible concern becomes how in a society that ostensibly emphasizes egalitarianism, can a milieu exist which allows police malfeasance to thrive? Myrdal (1944) as cited in Greene and Gabiddon (2013, p. 232) presents information on the historical legacy of the less than collegial relationship between Blacks and law enforcement by stating the following:

The average Southern policeman is a promoted poor White with a legal sanction to use a weapon. His social heritage has taught him to despise the Negroes, and he has had little education which could have changed him....The result is that probably no group of Whites in America have a lower opinion of the Negro people and are more fixed in their views than Southern policeman. (Myrdal 1944, pp. 540–541)

Myrdal (1944) was writing on results from a massive study that he undertook in the late 1930s. He was writing at a time that even the most conservative among us would have to admit was not a colorblind society (if one even believes in such things). But current research does corroborate his observations that less educated police officers tend to be the most aggressive and have the most formal complaints filed against them when compared to their more educated counterparts (Hassell and Archbold 2010; Jefferis et al. 2011).

Tonry (2011) delineates some interesting findings from the 2001 Race, Crime, and Public Opinion Survey that can be applied to understanding why the larger society tolerates police misconduct when it comes to Black males. The survey, which involved approximately 978 non-Hispanic Whites and 1,010 Blacks, revealed a divergence in attitudes between Blacks and Whites concerning the criminal justice system (Tonry 2011). For instance, 38 % of Whites and 89 % of Blacks viewed the criminal justice system as biased against Blacks (Tonry 2011). Additionally, 8 % of Blacks and 56 % of Whites saw the criminal justice system as treating Blacks fairly (Tonry 2011). Perhaps most revealing when it comes to facilitating an environment ripe for police brutality against Black males, 68 % of Whites and only 18 % of Whites expressed confidence in law enforcement (Tonry 2011). Is a society wherein the dominant group overwhelming approves of police performance willing to do anything substantive to curtail police brutality against Black males?

Police brutality is not a new phenomenon. The Department of Justice (DOJ) office of Civil Rights (OCR) has investigated more than a dozen police departments in major cities across the USA on allegations of either racial discrimination or police brutality (Gabbidon and Greene 2013). To make the aforementioned even more clear, according to Gabbidon and Greene (2013), “In 2010, the OCR was investigating 17 police departments across the country and monitoring five settlements regarding four police agencies” (pp. 119–120).

Plant and Peruche (2005) provide some useful information into why police officers view Black males as potential perpetrators and could lead to acts of brutality. In their research, the authors suggest that since Black people in general, and Black males in particular, are caricatured as aggressive and criminal, police are more likely to view Black men as a threat which justifies the disproportionate use of deadly force. Therefore, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that police officers’ decisions to act aggressively may, to some extent, be influenced by race (Jefferis et al. 2011).

The media’s portrayals of Black men are often less than sanguine. Bryson’s (1998) work in this area provides empirical evidence that the mass media that has been instrumental in portraying Black men as studs, super detectives, or imitation White men and has a general negative effect on how these men are regarded by others. Such characterizations can be so visceral in nature that “prototypes” of criminal suspects are more likely to be African-American (Oliver et al. 2004). Not surprisingly, the

more Afrocentric the African-American's facial features, the more prone he or she is expected to be deviant (Eberhardt et al. 2006). Interestingly, it is probable that less than flattering depictions of Black males on television and in news stories are activating pre-existing stereotypes possessed by Whites as opposed to facilitating their creation. According to Oliver et al. (2004), "it is important to keep in mind that media consumption is an active process, with viewers' existing attitudes and beliefs playing a larger role in how images are attended to, interpreted, and remembered" (p. 89). Moreover, it is reductionist to presuppose that individual is powerless in constructing a palatable version of reality and is solely under the control of the media and exercises no agency.

Lastly, Peffley and Hurwitz (2013) describe what can be perceived as one of the more deleterious results of negative media caricatures of Black males. More specifically, the authors posit that most Whites believe that Blacks are disproportionately inclined to engage in criminal behavior and are the deserving on harsh treatment by the criminal justice system. On the other hand, such an observation is curious because most urban areas are moderate to highly segregated residentially which would preclude the frequent and significant interaction needed to make such scathing indictments (Bonilla-Silva 2009). Consequently, the aforementioned racial animus has the effect of increased White support for capital punishment if questions regarding its legitimacy around if capital punishment is too frequently applied to Blacks (Peffley and Hurwitz 2013; Tonry 2011). Ultimately, erroneous (negative) portrayals of crime and community, community race and class identities, and concerns over neighborhood change all contribute to place-specific framing of "the crime problem." These frames, in turn, shape both intergroup dynamics and support for criminal justice policy (Leverentz 2012).

*Critical Race Theory* Critical race theory is a useful theoretical approach when examining the situations encountered by marginalized groups in a hierarchal society. The father of critical race theory, the late legal scholar Derrick Bell, opined in his classic *Faces at the Bottom of the Well* (1992) that "writing in critical race theory stresses that neither neatly divorceable from one another nor amenable to strict categorization" (pp. 144–145). Further, according to (Solorzano et al. 2000), a critical race approach is open to intense scrutiny of the experiences of subordinated groups because of its reliance on five areas of focus. The tenets of critical race theory are: (1) the primacy of race and racism and their interconnectedness with other forms of subordination, (2) a questioning of the dominant belief system/status quo, (3) a commitment to social justice, (4) the centrality of experiential knowledge, and (5) a multidisciplinary perspective (Crenshaw 2011, 2002; Solorzano et al. 2000; Zuberi 2011). Moreover, critical race theory is used in this paper to assess the media's coverage of the passing of Rodney King who was brutally beaten on tape by the Los Angeles Police Department in 1991. It was the beating of King, and the subsequent acquittal of some of the officers involved in his beating, that served as the spark that brought to light police brutality against minorities and served as the catalyst for Los Angeles riots of 1992. Finally, the less than sympathetic coverage of King's death will be analyzed within the larger framework of Black men being maligned in the media and as the victims of racial oppression, the prison industrial complex, mass incarceration, and the ill-conceived and ineffective war on drugs.

## Methodology

*Research Design* The methodology utilized in this study involved two steps. The first step involved examining the statistical findings presented in the NPMSRP (Police Brutality Statistics, April 13, 2011). The second step involved thoroughly reading the comments provided by contributors on the NPMSRP site and looking for recurrent themes within the narratives. To identify the themes that were presented within this paper, all narrative responses were content analyzed using grounded theory and an open-coding process (Holsti 1969; Strauss and Corbin 1990; Taylor and Bogdan 1998), and themes were identified from the narratives. In order to clearly abstract themes from the written responses, words and phrases were the units of analysis. Specifically, coding involved examining all responses, keeping track of emerging themes, assigning words and symbols to each coding category, and examining how the themes presented are specifically related to the public's perception of the police. In cases where the narrative provided by a respondent was compatible with two different themes (this was the case for the two narratives provided by *Karin Wildeisen*), the researchers made the decision to place the narratives with the category with which they best fit. To assess the reliability of the coding system, a list of all codes and their definitions along with the written responses was given to an outsider who then coded the transcripts based on this pre-determined list of codes. The outside coder was selected due to their experience with coding and analyzing narrative data. After a 98 % coding reliability rate was established between the first author and the outside coder, it was determined that a working coding system had been established. In order to sufficiently control for reliability, a second outside coder was selected to code and analyze the narrative data after the initial coding reliability had been established. The reliability established between the second author and the two outside coders was 97 %.

## Presentation of the Findings

Research question 1: What do findings from the NPMSRP suggest about the rate of police brutality in America?

Statistics from the NPMSRP were compiled between the months of April 2009 and June 2010. During this time, there were 5,986 reports of misconduct, 382 fatalities linked to misconduct, settlements and judgments that totaled \$347,455,000, and 33 % of misconduct cases that went through to convictions and 64 % of misconduct cases that received prison sentences. The average length of time convicted officers spent in prison was 14 months (Police Brutality Statistics, April 13, 2011). (See Table 1 for National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project on police brutality cases that happened between April 2009 and June 2010).

Research question 2: How do individuals perceive the police department, and what implications do these perceptions hold for Black men in America?

Grounded theory analysis of the data revealed four emergent themes: (a) contempt for law enforcement, (b) suspicion of law enforcement, (c) law enforcement as agents

**Table 1** National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project on police brutality cases that happened between April 2009 and June 2010

Reports of misconduct	Fatalities linked to misconduct	Related settlements and judgments	Police officer convictions
5,986	382	\$347,455,000	Percent that went through to convictions (33 %) Percent convicted that received prison sentences (64 %) Average length of time spent in prison (14 months)

of brutality, and (d) respect for law enforcement. The “contempt for law enforcement” theme was indicative of individuals who used words and/or phrases that represented their disdain (dislike) for law enforcement. The “suspicion of law enforcement” theme is words and/or phrases related to thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that members of law enforcement directly or indirectly engage in police brutality and/or condone the brutal actions of other members of law enforcement. The “law enforcement as agents of brutality” theme was related to words and/or phrases related to members of law enforcement directly or indirectly witnessing acts of brutality perpetrated by one or more members of law enforcement against citizens. The “respect for law enforcement” theme is related to words and/or phrases related to the belief that law enforcement contributes to order in society and that the members of law enforcement have good, altruistic, and benevolent intentions (see Table 2 for themes, definitions, and supporting commentary).

### Theme 1: Contempt for Law Enforcement

Five individuals (0.14 %) used words and/or phrases that represented their disdain (dislike) for law enforcement. Interestingly, the narratives ranged from insulting sarcasm (regarding the sexuality orientation of law enforcement) to indignation regarding the individuals that have been victims of police brutality. For example, a respondent by the name of *Scott* wrote the following on May 18, 2011 at 1:31 p.m.: “COPS SUCK! I like this website because it exposes the assholes that ‘protect’ us, for who they really are.” *Scott*’s comment was supported by *John* who wrote this on October 21, 2011 at 12:39 p.m.: “Police are some hoers.” Another respondent who identified himself/herself as *T* expressed anger at another blogger by the name of *Carolyn* who believed “police are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large.” The blogger *T* used these words to express their indignation on May 23, 2011 at 11:09 a.m.:

We are all entitled to our opinion but Carolyn, that’s bs. Google police brutality and see the number of people affected. Then you tell me what you think.

Although the narratives provided by most of these respondents expressed a strong contempt for law enforcement, one narrative juxtaposed the role of law enforcement

**Table 2** Theme, definition, and supporting commentary

Theme	Definition	Supporting commentary
Contempt for law enforcement	Words and/or phrases that represent a strong disdain (dislike) for law enforcement	“COPS SUCK! I like this website because it exposes the assholes that ‘protect’ us, for who they really are.”
Suspicion of law enforcement	Words and/or phrases related to thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that members of law enforcement directly or indirectly engage in police brutality and/or condone the brutal actions of other members of law enforcement	“What about their buddies who watched, covered for them, or looked the other way? The % of bad cops goes through the roof.”
Law enforcement as agents of brutality	Word and/or phrases directly or indirectly related to witnessing acts of brutality perpetrated by one or more members of law enforcement against citizens	“LOL at Ryan!!! These stats are for CONVICTIONS! Why don’t you do some research and find out the rate of convictions of OBVIOUS police abuse? Go ahead, start with the videos, there are hundreds of cops out there beating and robbing people on video that get no punishment... Now think to yourself, how many of these things are actually caught and camera...and the camera survives with video intact? Typical moron who can’t do simple objective thought that worships cops as heroes.”
Respect for law enforcement	Words and/or phrases related to the belief that law enforcement contributes to order in society and that the members of law enforcement have good, altruistic, and benevolent intentions	“Wow, this is pathetic. The people who go out every day, to protect you, are so disrespected in today’s society. Say that cops don’t do shit when they save you from someone with a gun, or stops you from killing yourself, or worse, someone else, when you are driving drunk. Go watch How Not to get your ass kicked by the Police, on YouTube by Chris Roek. It’ll show most of you what to do.”



in society against Emergency Medical and Trauma Services (EMTS) workers and firefighters. For this individual, members of the former group were “douchebags,” while members of the latter group (EMTS workers or firefighters) were praised by being referred to as “good guys.” One respondent by the name of *gabriel escobedo* expressed himself in this way on June 18, 2011 at 6:06 p.m.:

SHOUT OUT TO ALL THE EMTS AND FIREFIGHTERS EVERYWHERE  
THEY ARE THE GOOD GUYS. COPS ARE PRETENTIOUS DOUCHE  
BAGS. OFFICERS MAY HAVE A DANGEROUS JOB BUT Y CHOOSE A  
LINE OF WORK WHERE MOST OFF HATES YOU.

In contrast to the other four respondents, one blogger insinuated that some members of law enforcement are inclined to become cops due to latent homosexual inclinations and/or tendencies. Such was the case for *Pig killer* who wrote the following on May 18, 2012 at 11:43 p.m.:

Why do cops shower together after work? They don't get dirty... Maybe it explains why they all have moustaches, for the tickle effect?

Clearly, these five individuals have a strong contempt for members of law enforcement and used derogatory terms or labels (e.g., “assholes,” “hoes,” “douche bags,” “Pig killer”) to express their opinions about cops that they deem less than honorable. Essentially, these individuals expressed delight that the NPMSRP on police brutality cases (and other Internet forums) exists as these “exposes” law enforcement whose goal is to “protect” others. Thus, statistics related to incidents of reporting misconduct of law enforcement and the actual stories of individuals that have been victims of police brutality shed light on an “ugly truth”: that some members of law enforcement are perpetrators of brutality against citizens.

## Theme 2: Suspicion of Law Enforcement

Eight individuals (0.22 %) used words and/or phrases that represented thoughts, feelings, or beliefs that members of law enforcement directly or indirectly engage in police brutality and/or condone the brutal actions of other members of law enforcement. A closer examination of the responses related to suspicion regarding law enforcement revealed four subthemes: (a) the acknowledgement that if members of law enforcement do not personally engage in acts of police brutality, they are complicit in these acts by covering them up or ignoring them; (b) the need to be proactive by protecting the rights of citizens; (c) the double standard enjoyed by members of law enforcement that is not afforded to citizens; and (d) the need for members of law enforcement to be respected while not affording this same respect to others.

Regarding the capacity for members of law enforcement to cover up or ignore acts of police brutality, *doug* provided this comment on May 12, 2011 at 6:33 p.m.: “What about their buddies who watched, covered for them, or looked the other way? The % of bad cops goes through the roof.” Another blogger, *Ccoltmanm* encouraged others to discuss “police ignorance” in an attempt to “defend citizen rights” by writing this on May 21, 2011 at 9:26 p.m.: “Discuss police ignorance here, need help defending citizen rights” and then provided the following link to facilitate this dialogue:

<http://forums.officer.com/forums/showthread.php?165493-Video-Taping-a-Cop>. A few bloggers drew attention to the double standard that allows law enforcement to freely get away with behaviors that most people cannot. A respondent by the name of *Christina* shared her perspective on June 17, 2011 at 5:32 p.m. in these words:

If it was me doing the same things the cops were doing I would get thrown under the jail and key thrown away!

In support of *Christina's* view that cops do things “to hurt people,” another respondent by the name of *Nick* suspect law enforcement would go to great lengths to commit murder and even expose of the body. To support this, *Nick* said the following on July 18, 2011 at 7:58 a.m.

Yeah James the FBI would spend all these years looking for you if they wanted you dead they would've taken you in their van and dumped your body in a lake.

*Rob* felt the need to be proactive in helping others who were suspicious of law enforcement by offering assistance. He provided this comment on September 17, 2011 at 6:46 p.m.: “I lived up in Alaska, Homer actually. Any way we could help?” Another blogger, *Miz*, who was also suspicious of the police, drew attention to the date of the statistics and recommended that recent ones be provided. This blogger provided this simple statement on January 28, 2012 at 12:45 a.m.: “I would like to see this updated.” Another respondent by the name of *Lady Luck* felt it ironic that members of law enforcement demand respect from others, but do not afford others this same respect. This female shared her feelings on March 19, 2012 at 4:39 p.m. through these words:

COPS KNOW WHAT THEY ARE DOING WHEN THEY SIGN THEIR SIGNATURE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PAPER THAT SAYS YES I KNOW THAT MY LIFE WILL AND CAN BE IN DANGER BUT I TAKE THAT RESPONSIBILITY. AND NOW THEY WANT TO GO BALLS TO THE WALL AND HAVE EVERYONE HONOR AND RESPECT THEM.

Interestingly, even after providing this narrative that highlighted her suspicion of and frustration with law enforcement, *Lady Luck* responded to *Ashley*, a law student who wrote on February 29, 2012 at 7:47 p.m., that “there are so many laws out there to ‘protect our rights’ that it makes it almost impossible for cops to do their job,” on March 19, 2012 at 4:43 p.m. by reminding her: “@Ashley—LAW AND JUSTICE ARE AND WILL FOREVER BE TWO DIFFERENT THINGS ENTIRELY!” Like the previously mentioned respondent, *Ccoltmanm*, *donna hoover* was another blogger that was suspicious of law enforcement and encouraged others to “stop police brutality in RCSD” by signing a petition. This female encouraged other bloggers to do this on August 29, 2012 at 11:35 p.m. when she wrote: “Please sign this petition to stop police brutality in RCSD.”

Clearly, these eight men and women have doubts that law enforcement consistently work in the best interest for citizens. In addition to acknowledging that members of law enforcement may directly (personally engage in acts of police brutality) or indirectly (cover up or ignore the acts of police brutality), other respondents complained about the privileged standing in society that law enforcement enjoy that is not afforded to citizens. Furthermore, several respondents felt the need to take a pro-

active approach by encouraging others who “need help defending citizen rights” to freely and openly dialogue about “police ignorance,” their negative experiences with law enforcement or sign a petition that would “stop police brutality” in a particular area of the country.

### Theme 3: Law Enforcement as Agents of Brutality

Sixteen individuals (0.44 %) used words and/or phrases that directly or indirectly related to witnessing acts of brutality perpetrated by one or more members of law enforcement against citizens. A closer examination of the responses related to suspicion regarding law enforcement revealed four subthemes: (a) the acknowledgment that members of law enforcement directly (personally engage in acts of police brutality) or indirectly (cover up or ignore acts of police brutality by fellow officers), (b) the double standard enjoyed by members of law enforcement that is not afforded to citizens, and (c) the hypocrisy involved when members of law enforcement demand respect, yet show little respect to citizens.

To help put each of these subthemes in perspective, a respondent by the name of *George Sand* drew attention to the statistically high percent of murders by police who make up a small subset of the general population. He used these words to express himself on May 11, 2011 at 1:29 p.m.:

According to the FBI website, there were about 13,000 murder victims in 2009 (2010 data not available yet it seems). Now compare that to police. The chart above indicates 13 % were fatality-type misconduct. That comes out to be about 330 misconduct-fatalities. There are 415,000 officers. That would indicate police are 16 times more likely to murder. Or, if you add the police killings (330 people) to the 13,000 murders, police account for 2.4 percent of the murders, whereas they account only for 0.2 percent of the population.

In support of the comment provided by *George Sand*, a woman by the name of *Christina* recounted an incident where her husband was physically abused by a police officer. This woman used these words to tell her story on May 30, 2011 at 7:37 p.m.:

My husband was really abused by an officer last week. He got out of the truck put his hands up and got on the ground. While he was on the ground the officer tazed him. It was stuck in his skull...then the officer continued to taze him 2 more times...While he was having a seizure. I am at a loss. I don't know who to report this to. [christinastills@ymail.com](mailto:christinastills@ymail.com)

Sadly, *Christina's* story of physical abuse at the hands of police officers was not the only one. Another male by the name of *James Murphy* recounts that his “nightmare” began when he witnessed a murder and thereafter became a target of the FBI. This man wrote the following on June 10, 2011 at 1:50 p.m.:

My nightmare. I have witnessed so much crime since I was born it is not funny. I was 7 or 9 years old I witnessed one building blow up and a man killed other man then that man followed us to the train station where he was shot by a NYPD officer. One week later a white van pulls up across the street from where we were walking, a man in the van called a man to he's van a gave him money

and a gun they followed me and my grandmother to the check cashing place and inside the store there is the same cop very nerves and scared 10 minutes later the man who was in the van open fired on me the NYPD officer took a bullet for me as he laid there dying he told me who did this and my nightmare began. The FBI wants me dead.

In contrast to the previous narratives, a respondent who went by the identifier *whatgoesaroundcomesaround* expressed indignation that members of law enforcement become “captain kill who I want and do what I want” but the complicity by which individuals who serve in this way cover for the actions of their fellow officers, even when they know they are wrong. This poster provided this extended narrative on April 9, 2012 at 5:58 p.m.:

I am not sure exactly why some people still feel the need to say it is ok for COPS to do the things they do. Yes there about 5 good cops in each town, and I am only saying this because that’s what I have seen and I have also seen the rest of them so full of crap that an Ex-lax will not help! You know what you sign up for so shut up with all the whining. So is it ok for every person who joins the Military to go and beat someone because they are stressed out? If you cannot handle your job the way you are supposed to then leave the job! Officers feel that since they have on that uniform and badge that they are captain kill who I want and do what I want because I know my buddies will back me up. I think any officer who covers up for their so called buddy should face punishment as well. I have seen police do things that are dead wrong and nothing has happened to them.

In support of the perspective provided by *whatgoesaroundcomesaround*, another poster by the name of *samantha* expressed disgust with the police’s inclination to be self-absorbed (“being so in their own little world”), conceited (“thinking they’re so high and mighty”), and selfishness (“being more help to us”). This woman used these words to share her emotional state on June 6, 2012 at 3:23 p.m.:

The police are freaking stupid for not seeing what’s going on and maybe some of them should quit being so in their own little world and thinking they’re so high and mighty, and being more help to us. They are supposed to be around to help our community and all they do is beat up people to make them feel like they actually did something good which in reality all they did was hurt some person. I also think that if you’re going to be a police officer, do it the right way not your way. or maybe you should talk to people before jumping to conclusions for real

In response to a comment made by a blogger who believed the findings from the NPMSRP ignore the contributions of the majority of men and women of law enforcement who protect and serve the community (Ryan’s entire comment will be provided in the next section), a male respondent, by the name of *Ian*, reminded Ryan that the statistics provided by this website were only for convictions, and not obvious cases of police brutality. Ian used the following words to make this point clear on June 27, 2011 at 9:35 p.m.:

LOL at Ryan!!! These stats are for CONVICTIONS! Why don’t you do some research and find out the rate of convictions of OBVIOUS police abuse? Go

ahead, start with the videos, there are hundreds of cops out there beating and robbing people on video that get no punishment.

Another female respondent used the phrase “out of control” to refer to the amount of police brutality that occurs in Alaska, her state of residence. *Jewels* shared her view in this way on September 17, 2011 at 12:44 p.m.:

The cops up here are so out of control!!! They think they do have extra rights... just one incident.. after a guy was detained in a cop car they had to take him to the hospital for the damage they had done to him.. he made the mistake of saying law suit and while they were at the hospital and he was in handcuffs they emptied pepper spray on him in the back seat.

To extend the specific incidences of police brutality that were provided by other respondents, another woman shared with others that the police in her community were part of a gang, she was arrested “based on a false report,” was not read her “Miranda” rights, and was personally battered by the police. The 63-year old *Lorraine* said this on September 28, 2011 at 12:34 a.m.:

I reported to the police that there is a gang in my community. Then I found out that the police were part of the gang. They arrested me based on a false police report. I was all black, blue and swollen when I was released to my family after they raised 5K\$ cash.

A few days later, a blogger who identified himself/herself by the handle, *The Beginning is Near*, responded to a post provided earlier by Carolyn who believed that the police “keep sanity and security in our homes” (Carolyn’s entire narrative will be provided in the next section) by providing a strong argument that belies this claim. To further support this individual’s view, he/she provided a YouTube video that provides visual proof that the police are agents of brutality. *The Beginning is Near* provided this perspective on October 2, 2011 at 1:30 p.m.:

...the police are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large...

Response: Then that explains why our society is in such bad shape.

Note: the police force in this video is considered one of the BEST police forces in the country. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgr3DqWYCI&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgr3DqWYCI&feature=player_embedded)

Sadly, other respondents were physically assaulted by law enforcement. Similar to the trauma experienced by the 63-year-old *Lorraine*, *Travis Wilkerson* was also physically abused by the police. In his narrative, he called law enforcement’s use of excessive force “an understatement,” shared that his “civil rights were 100 % neglected as none of us were read our rights” [Miranda Rights], asked for help with securing good legal representation, and even provided his email contact information. *Travis Wilkerson* expressed his frustration with the way that he was treated by the police in this way on December 4, 2011 at 11:03 p.m.:

I was assaulted by the SDPD after I got sucker punched from some guy trying to talk to my wife. Right after I got hit from that guy the SDPD ambushed all of us like we were criminals. Got cuffed right away then picked up by two officers and slammed into the ground head first. I blacked out and then they pepper sprayed me while I was already on the ground. I need some great representation so if anyone interested can help contact me here [travis.wilkerson87@gmail.com](mailto:travis.wilkerson87@gmail.com)

Another poster suggested that technological advances that members of law enforcement currently enjoy are inconsistent with an antiquated code of professional conduct. Essentially, while the police are given the best that technology has to offer, they are not held to a standard that is appropriate for this day and time. This was the view expressed by *Karin Wildeisen* on February 11, 2012 at 5:26 p.m.:

The reality is that this country has armed our law enforcement with 21st century technology, yet continues to hold them to a 19th century code of conduct. We make excuses for the damage they cause, while we look the other way and hope nobody embarrasses us into actually doing something about their behavior. Either you conduct yourself with some personal control, or you don't.

Interestingly, after providing this narrative, *Karin Wildeisen* responded to a blogger by the name of Andrew (on June 17, 2011 at 1:30 a.m. and will be provided in the next section) who shared that he would not run to the chief to get his “friend locked up for years,” even if his friend shot a child. *Karin* simply said this on February 11, 2012 at 5:34 p.m.: “P.S. Andrew, you are frightening.” Like other respondents, an individual who identified himself/herself by the identifier, *fdgfdg*, also condemned police officers that use the difficulties involved with their job as a reason to abuse their power in this way on March 19, 2012 at 7:44 a.m.: “Some pretty weak arguments from cop-apologists here. Mostly played-out defenses like ‘But you civies [civilians] just don't KNOW! It's so HARD!’ Cry me a river.”

Another male blogger, *saul roashan*, used the NPMSRP website to help him write a school report on the negative effects of police brutality. He wrote this on May 1, 2012 at 2:06 p.m.: “I have to write a report on police brutality and this has helped a lot. I was just wondering if you guys had anything I could use to write a persuasive essay on how police brutality is bad? Thanks guys and james murphy... stfu.”

Six days later, a respondent who used the initials *BRK* was irritated at the view that police brutality is rare by stating that “it shouldn't happen at all.” This individual expressed their feelings in this way on May 7, 2012 at 9:12 p.m.: “It doesn't matter if it's rare or not, it shouldn't happen at all, get your head out of your ass.” Less than 24 h after *BRK* provided their perspective, another blogger felt impelled to use “logic” to break down each of the “false arguments” provided by individuals that felt the need to defend the inappropriate actions of some members of law enforcement. This person, who used the initials “*aj*,” used the following words on May 8, 2012 at 2:47 p.m. to debunk the arguments provided by individuals that support law enforcement:

Ok, time for logic. ‘Cops are people too’: false argument and irrelevant. Criminals are also people, but still need to be punished for their crimes. ‘Giving someone some slack’ is a stupid statement that has nothing to do with law. ‘It's

a tough, dangerous job.’ False argument. Lots of jobs are tough and dangerous. That doesn’t give anyone leave to violate the legal constraints of their authority.

The most recent comment on this thread was provided by a poster that used the identifier “cops have bad days too” sarcastically to demonstrate that although they may have “a bad day,” this is not an excuse to use weapons against or beat citizens. To make this point clear, this individual believes that a zero-tolerance policy should be in place for law enforcement that physically abuse others and even insinuates that he/she was abused by the police. This individual expressed their opinion in this way on September 19, 2012 at 8:59 a.m.:

Police officers are trained to handle the law, not abuse it. ‘Having a bad day’ is not an excuse for brutality, and obviously the people saying this have never experienced forms of police brutality. If you are a police officer that ‘has a bad day’ every now and then and senselessly beats citizens, sometimes using weapons against them, and in some cases killing them, you SHOULD NOT be a police officer.

The comments provided by these 16 men and women demonstrate their conviction that law enforcement are agents of brutality on citizens. Although some individuals were aware of the heightened rate of brutality among members of law enforcement, or were angered by the double standard that gives members of law enforcement the freedom to do things that civilians could never get away with, others recounted personal, traumatic experiences with the police that involved the use of excessive force, stripped them of their dignity, violated their civil rights, and, in some cases, put their lives in danger. For individuals in the latter group, this website was a forum by which they could freely tell others about their negative experiences with law enforcement, have their feelings validated, and possibly get the help that they need.

#### Theme 4: Respect for Law Enforcement

Seven individuals (0.20 %) used words and/or phrases related to the belief that law enforcement contributes to order in society and that the members of law enforcement have good, altruistic, and benevolent intentions. The three subthemes related to this primary theme were related to: (a) the small percent of law enforcement that are reported for or convicted of misconduct, (b) the need for citizens to avoid run-ins with law enforcement by adhering to the law, and (c) the need for members of law enforcement to exercise self-control in their line of work yet be seen as human beings by citizens. A blogger by the name of *Ryan* pointed to the miniscule number of law enforcement officers that are reported for misconduct. On May 11, 2011 at 2:58 a.m. he wrote this:

There are nearly half a million (Approximately 415,000) cops in the United States. According to this graphic, police brutality is extremely rare. According to this graphic, 0.012 percent of our nation’s law enforcement officers were even reported on misconduct, let alone found guilty of it. 99.98 percent of the police that protect our nation’s people are well trained professionals that simply have the desire to serve our community.

Nine days later (on May 20, 2011 at 3:24 p.m.), a woman by the name of *Carolyn* further reiterated Ryan’s comment regarding the small percent of law enforcement that are reported for or convicted of misconduct by highlighting that the men and women who serve in this capacity “are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large.” *Carolyn* wrote this at 3:24 p.m.:

The average person such as myself doesn’t have what it takes to be a police or be involved in any type of law enforcement. We complain and most of the time we have terrible things to say about officers, but in all actuality (outside of almighty GOD) the police are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large.

The small percent of law enforcement that are reported for or convicted of misconduct, a subtheme that was introduced by Ryan, was reiterated by another male by the name of *Andrew*, who shared this view on June 17, 2011 at 1:30 a.m.:

Cops are people....people who everyday are put into volatile situations, and they are trained to be able to kill....their jobs are dangerous a bad day could end in the accidental shooting of someone who they thought had a weapon. Give them some slack statistically they are really good if they’re not fucking up.

In contrast to the other bloggers that drew attention to the small percent of law enforcement that are reported for or convicted of misconduct, or the ability of these men and women to be “the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes,” another male believed that citizens should take personal responsibility and avoid run-ins with law enforcement by avoiding “stupid” actions that would cause them problems. To support this view, a male by the name of *John Dohoe* provided this statement on September 14, 2011 at 2:13 p.m.:

Want to get rid of the need for cops??? Here’s the key: DONT DO STUPID THINGS. If you’re having problems with cops, it probably means you just need to swallow some pride and admit that you were doing something wrong.

Like *Carolyn*, another blogger who used the identifier “*Cry more*,” was appalled at the perceived lack of respect that several individuals had for members of law enforcement. In addition, this individual even recommended that others view a YouTube video provided by Chris Rock that makes it clear how to avoid a confrontation with law enforcement. This poster expressed himself/herself in this way when he/she wrote the following on November 12, 2011 at 3:54 p.m.:

Wow, this is pathetic. Go watch How Not to get your ass kicked by the Police, on YouTube by Chris Rock. It’ll show most of you what to do.

The following two narratives, which were both provided by women, support the views offered by previous bloggers, yet provide a nuanced way of looking at law enforcement as a potential agent for bad, but primarily one for good. *Ashley*, a law student, provided an extended narrative that acknowledges the cops “that should just not be officers,” with the 85 % of officers “that keep your neighborhoods safe, or keep your daughter from being raped, or save your grandma from getting her purse stolen.” *Ashley* wrote this extended narrative on February 29, 2012 at 7:47 p.m.:



Ok so I am guessing that not many of you people are cops. I am currently a law student and there are so many laws out there to ‘protect our rights’ that it makes it almost impossible for cops to do their job. Yes I will admit that there are some cops that should just not be officers, but what about the other 85 % or so of the officers that keep your neighborhoods safe, or keep you daughter from being raped, or save your grandma from getting her purse stolen. Police officer statistics for brutality is high, but if you look at the statistics of the divorce rate, alcoholism, and suicide that comes from being an officer you may change your mind. It is a crazy stressful job and most officers do the best they can.

Less than 48 h after Ashley provided the aforementioned narrative, a woman by the name of *Karin Wildeisen* felt it important to remind Ashley that although an abundance of laws “makes it almost impossible for cops to do their job,” members of law enforcement must adhere to a certain code of behavior, even when they are under duress. *Karin Wildeisen* wrote this extensive commentary to Ashley on March 1, 2012 at 11:40 p.m.:

I am completely in support of GOOD law enforcement. However, I believe that support should include a civilian mechanism to cull those who don’t maintain the standard of professionalism met by the ‘average officer,’ in a fashion similar to the ‘reasonable person’ standard. It’s a standard that’s common to many of today’s high-stress professional arenas. As a nurse, no matter how bad my day may be, egregious personal injury to those I was assigned to serve and protect will be punished both by law and by the moral codes of my society. There is a civilian mechanism in place for those injured parties, or even concerned professionals who see a coworker in distress, to seek help.

When a soldier returns to society from battle, regardless of the battlefield trauma he may have witnessed, or even participated in, he is expected to conduct himself with a certain degree of self-control. Egregious damage to the citizens he had been sworn to protect and serve will be punished both by law and by the moral codes of his society, whether that is military or civilian. There is a civilian mechanism in place through which a soldier, or others concerned for him, may seek help.

Only law enforcement is supposed to stoically endure and BE endured, everybody bound and gagged behind the Blue Wall. How is perpetuating that lack of support helping ANYBODY? It sure didn’t help the cop in Jefferson County, KS who, because he felt unsupported, blew the lower half of his face off with his own weapon on my father-in-law’s farm. It didn’t help the local cop in the news tonight who assaulted his ex-wife and her new boyfriend with a knife. The news quotes him, “Call the cops and see what happens.

These seven comments speak to the need for members of society to have greater respect for the men and women of law enforcement. For these individuals, these individuals deserve respect because they make up such a small percent of the larger body of law enforcement that are reported for or convicted of misconduct, citizens need to avoid run-ins with law enforcement by adhering to the law, and while

members of law enforcement need to exercise self-control in their line of work, they must be seen as individuals, and not just as badges.

## Discussion

This paper had two primary goals. The first goal was to examine what findings from the NPMSRP suggest about the rate of police brutality in America. The second goal was to examine how individuals qualitatively perceive law enforcement, as well as what those implications hold for Black men in America. This study contributes to the growing body of scholarly work that has examined perceptions regarding law enforcement by giving attention to the numbers as well as what anonymous men and women say about those numbers. Essentially, these perceptions directly speak to the feelings that individuals within society individually and collectively create regarding law enforcement. Thus, this research contributes to the narrative of the lived US experiences of African-descended people, post-enslavement. However, before responding to each of the research questions, the limitations of this study should be noted.

Although grounded theory is compatible with the novel aims of this research, there are two limitations regarding the “data” that should be noted. First and foremost that the “data” are extracted from a public website makes it impossible to determine the demographic characteristics of the participants. In particular, a public website makes it impossible to determine whether gender, age, sex, marital status, education, occupation, and sexual orientation of the individuals commenting. Another possible limitation is that even though other forms of data collection such as interviews, surveys, and focus groups allow individuals to provide false information, the anonymity of a public website could considerably increase this risk. In other words, people may be more likely to falsify or embellish their experiences. Given these limitations, the anonymity of a public website makes it possible for individuals to more openly share their views, feelings, and experiences and could thus decrease the risk of social desirability. More clearly, the anonymity of a public website could facilitate a greater level of honesty, especially among individuals who would not ordinarily share their views publicly or have lived through traumatic experiences that few people know about. In addition, that individuals are allowed to share their perspectives in “real time” and agree and disagree with the perspectives of others can further increase the validity of the findings presented herein. Furthermore, an examination of these data revealed that many used this forum as an opportunity to seek and give help to others. So, in essence, this website created a strong, sensitive, and safe community by which individuals could freely and openly share their feelings and experiences and request help for themselves or others. Clearly, while social desirability is an inherent risk of any form of data collection, we believe that the anonymity of a public website allows for a higher degree of honesty and self-disclosure than may be afforded in an interview, survey, or focus group. This represents a major strength of the current study.

### Findings from the NPMSRP and Police Brutality in America

As previously mentioned, the findings from the NPMSRP were compiled between the months of April 2009 and June 2010. In particular, there were 5,986 reports of

misconduct, 382 fatalities linked to misconduct, settlements and judgments that totaled \$347,455,000, and 33 % of misconduct cases that went through to convictions and 64 % of misconduct cases that received prison sentences. There are several aspects that we found disturbing about this report. First, these findings were compiled and released 18 years after the nationally publicized Rodney King beating. Therefore, one cannot help but wonder about the number of cases of police misconduct that went unreported and did not secure prison sentences. Second, we are currently in 2012 and quickly approaching 2013, so these statistics are outdated (28 months old) and do not accurately speak to the current rate of reports of misconduct and sentencing of law enforcement. Interestingly, while the average length of time convicted officers spent in prison was 14 months, the average length of post-conviction incarceration for the general public was 49 months (National Police Misconduct Reporting Project 2011).

### How Individuals Perceive the Police Department and the Implications of These Perceptions for Black Men in America

The narratives from the 36 respondents on the NPMSRP reveal that the majority of individuals have a negative view of law enforcement. In particular, most had a strong contempt for members of law enforcement, are suspicious of them, or see them as perpetrators of police brutality.

*Theme 1: Contempt for Law Enforcement* Although the narratives provided by these five respondents expressed disdain for law enforcement, the comment provided by *gabriel escobedo* suggests that the public does not have the same view of all government workers. In particular, this blogger makes a clear distinction between EMTS workers, firefighters, and members of law enforcement. Although he referred to members of law enforcement as “douchebags,” he perceived EMTS workers and firefighters as “the good guys.” This may be due to the fact that individuals in these professions are generally known to save lives, while the former generally take lives, frequently “in the line of duty.”

*Theme 2: Suspicion of Law Enforcement* These eight respondents had doubts that members of law enforcement would act honorably, and *Miz* shared that he/she wanted to see these statistics “updated.” In particular, they believed that even though the police are aware that their actions are inappropriate, they are likely to use excessive force (even when unnecessary) and conceal the actions of other members of law enforcement who act inappropriately. An example to support this is *doug’s* suspicion that if one were to include statistics related to the number of cops that “watched, covered for them, or looked the other way,” the percent of “bad cops goes through the roof.” A more disturbing example is *Nick’s* view that “if they wanted you dead they would’ve taken you in their van and dumped your body in a lake.” Interestingly, some bloggers, such as *Ccoltmanm*, *donna hoover*, and *Rob* believed it was their personal responsibility to “discuss police ignorance” and protect the rights of citizens by encouraging them to “stop police brutality in RCSD” by signing a petition. In addition to merely listening to the stories of those who provided them, *Rob* offered to help those who needed it. Thus, these individuals saw themselves as catalysts for positive change for the disenfranchised in society. Added to the negative feelings

experienced by these men and women is the belief that the rules that apply to citizens do not apply to members of law enforcement. Thus, respondents like *Christina* objected to cop's ability "to hurt people" as well as the double standard that allows members of law enforcement to be held to a different standard of conduct from those of citizens. In addition to this, several respondents like *Lady Luck* noted that the police demand respect from others, but rarely afford others the same dignity and respect. For this woman, "law and justice are and will forever be two different things entirely."

*Theme 3: Law Enforcement as Agents of Brutality* Although the videotaped beating of Rodney King was for many Blacks in America the defining moment that provided undeniable proof that the police use excessive force (brutality) in their dealings with Black citizens, several individuals revealed personal stories of horror when dealing with members of law enforcement. In fact, 16 of 36 bloggers (44 %) made statements/posts that reflected a belief that law enforcement officers were agents of police brutality. Five of the most succinct narratives that were illustrative of respondents' sentiments will be discussed. These narratives varied from a more general or macro discussion of police officers of "purveyors of unchecked violence" to "personal accounts" of violence that were perpetrated against them directly or to someone that they were acquainted with or lived in their community. For example, *Ian*, who presents a more "general" account, was responding to a statistically inaccurate estimation of the frequency of police malfeasance made by another blogger. Ian's comments poke fun at the statements made by a previous blogger who spoke on his opinion that police officers have a difficult job and should be treated with a degree of deference and leniency. Ian retorted that officers are frequently abusive and these instances are often caught on video tape, but yet are often unpunished.

*George Sand* gave a more general, and very accurate, statistical analysis of the frequency of police brutality when he drew attention to the fact that "police are 16 times more likely to murder" than members of the general population. To help further bring this statistic into perspective, *George Sand* acknowledges that although police comprise only "0.2 percent of the population," they are "account for 2.4 percent of the murders." Conversely, several of the bloggers gave more "personal" or "micro accounts" of police brutality. These explanations can be perceived as examples of how police brutality "intimately" touches the lives of its victims. One respondent, *Lorraine* was shocked to learn that after she reported gang activity in her neighborhood, the police were actually "part of the gang." To make matters worse, the phone call of this disabled woman to police caused her to be falsely arrested, "not read her rights," and "battered by police." Thus, the likelihood of this woman (and others like her in the nation's communities) turning to police when suspicious gang activity presents in their neighborhoods is highly unlikely and may heighten their physical, emotional, and psychological stress. While *Lorraine* was antagonized by the police individually, another blogger was part of a group that was assaulted. Such was the case for *Travis Wilkerson*, who was part of a group that was "ambushed," "slammed onto the ground," and was awakened in the back of a paddy wagon when he began to choke on his own vomit. This man was denied care, voiced that his "civil rights were 100 % neglected," as neither he nor any of the members in this company were read their rights. A particularly interesting fact to note in this story is that not only did this

man request help to secure “great representation” that could help him obtain the justice that he feels he deserves but provided his personal email address so that others could directly contact him. The use of his first and last name suggests that *Travis Wilkerson*, and individuals who have shared the same or similar experiences, may be more likely to turn to a website due to its widespread exposure and may have faith that they will receive the help that they need.

Another example to support this theme was provided by *Jewels*. This Alaskan resident recounted an incident where a man that publicly shared that he would sue the police department had an entire can of pepper spray emptied on him in the back seat of a police car. In this case, it seems that the police viewed this man’s threat (whether real or perceived) as a rationale for increased anger. Thus, even the public mention of “a law suit” from individuals in police custody may increase their likelihood of being assaulted, rather than diminish it.

Obviously, the examples included in theme 3 clearly indicate that police brutality is a problem. Even more important it is a problem, along with police misconduct in general, that has come to the attention of larger government agencies such as the DOJ (Gabbidon and Greene 2013). The respondents presented accounts that were statistical examples of police brutality in terms of its frequency of occurrence along with accounts that were more personal and direct examples of police misconduct. However, when compared with the prevailing literature which shows that majority of Americans appear to have confidence in the ability of police to perform their jobs, this massive social problem will probably continue (Alexander 2010; Tonry 2011).

*Theme 4: Respect for Law Enforcement* Seven individuals had a high regard for members of law enforcement. In particular, these individuals believed that this agency is necessary to societal order and that the members who are part of this system have good, altruistic, and benevolent intentions. To support their views, *Ryan* drew attention to how “extremely rare misconduct in law enforcement is” and complained that this website should highlight the number of officers that are daily “killed in the line of duty.” For *Carolyn*, “outside of almighty GOD, the police are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large,” and due to this position, they are “supermen, God manifest in flesh” that magnifies their mistakes. In fact, *Andrew* thought so highly of law enforcement even if his friend on “a bad day” shot a child, he “would not get his friend locked up for years.”

While the individuals that provided these responses may be members of law enforcement (not one respondent self-identified as a member of law enforcement), they may be family or friends of members of law enforcement, or strongly believe that law enforcement generally act in the best interests of society. In addition, these individuals may be more likely to support the views provided by *John Dohoe* and “Cry more” that the fault primarily lies with citizens who choose to “do stupid things” and disobey the law than with members of law enforcement whose mission it is to uphold it. Moreover, these individuals believed that most individuals in society see the badge instead of the person behind the badge, who is someone’s loved one who daily puts himself or herself in harm’s way. Essentially, these individuals believed that, even though the police “are the backbone that keeps sanity and security in our homes, neighborhoods, and the world at large,” the level of disrespect that they

receive from many members in society is unwarranted and unjustified. Interestingly, the narratives provided by Ashley and *Karin Wildeisen* highlight the dangers of police work, yet these women perceive those dangers through different lens. Ashley, a law student, utilizes a more “sympathetic lens” in that she believed members of law enforcement have “a crazy stressful job” and have experiences that the average person “could never deal with.” On the other hand, *Karin Wildeisen* completely supports “GOOD law enforcement” and believes support for policemen “should include a civilian mechanism to cull those who don’t maintain the standard of professionalism met by the “average officer,” in a fashion similar to the “reasonable person” standard.

### Critical Race Theory, Racism, and Police Brutality in America

Critical race theory served as the intellectual foundation for our study. Critical race theory has applicability to our topic because it draws from a broad body of literature which extends to the area of law and can be further extended to the area of police brutality (Solorzano et al. 2000). Further, critical race theory captures how race is structurally embedded within institutional structures, i.e., law enforcement, exacerbating the expression of White hegemony and ostensibly increasing the likelihood of disparate treatment of marginalized societal groups (e.g., Black males and other men of color) to keep them subjugated (Bell 1992).

Reflecting upon the four emergent themes from our examination of the statistical findings and comments presented by contributors to the NPMSRP revealed that critical race theory holds promise for our current study and subsequent studies. More specifically, the first three themes, contempt for law enforcement, suspicion of law enforcement, and law enforcement as agents of police brutality, can be easily understood by critically probing the racist perceptions of law enforcement held by people of color, particularly African-Americans (Gabbidon and Greene 2013; Staples 2011). In turn, the impact of the first three aforementioned themes makes the fourth theme (respect for law enforcement) tenuous at best and virtually impossible.

Skolnick and Fyfe (1994) asserted that the police are an extension of White supremacy in the field. Accordingly, it should not come as a surprise that increases in police sensitivity training, higher educational requirements for officer recruits, community policing, and other progressive approaches have not produced a measurable decrease in police brutality against Black males because none of these initiatives specifically address the larger societal issues of police brutality and White supremacy of which police are an extension (Alexander 2010; Feagin 2010).

Evidence of the ineffectiveness of the aforementioned contemporary methods to remedy the issue of police brutality can be found in the large numbers of police departments that have and are being investigated by the DOJ (no fewer than 17) for police brutality, shooting and killing unarmed civilians, and other forms of police malfeasance (Desmond-Harris 2012; Gabbidon and Greene 2013; Lozano 2012). A critical race approach would suggest that not critically taking race into account hinders optimal law enforcement practices because when citizens, particularly people of color, view the police as “corrupt” and “above the law,” they are more inclined to uphold urban subcultural mandates such as “stop snitching” (Anderson 2000; Jefferis

et al. 2011). Conversely, it helps us to understand why the police officers view Black males as potential perpetrators and how race plays in aggressive actions against Black males (Jefferis et al. 2011; Plant and Peruche 2005).

### Directions for Future Research

There are several ways that future studies can expound upon the findings that have been presented here. First, the findings from the NPMSRP were compiled between the months of April 2009 and June 2010 and are outdated. We are now in 2013. Thus, in order to better determine the number of law enforcement that have been reported for misconduct, the number of fatalities linked to misconduct, the number of settlements and judgments related to misconduct, and the amount of time that law enforcement spend in prison, we strongly recommend that the NPMSRP findings be updated weekly and that these findings be made available to the public via the Internet and agencies that typically serve marginalized members of society who are most likely to be victims of police brutality. Second, the findings of this study beg scholars to more closely examine the stories of men and women that have been victims of police brutality. As evidenced by several of the narratives presented in this study, these experiences were frustrating, demoralizing, and traumatizing for the victims because there was no one that could help them. Greater qualitative work in this area would reveal how these individuals and their families remain resilient in the face of trauma, as well as the negative physical, emotional, psychological, or spiritual effects of the abuse on the victims and their families. Lastly, since this study focused on how law enforcement is perceived by the public, future scholars should examine the perspectives of these individuals. In particular, such an endeavor would highlight the duality of the law enforcement experience, namely how members of law enforcement sees themselves, as well as how they believe the public perceives them.

### Conclusion

This study contributes to a burgeoning area of scholarly inquiry that has explored ideas regarding law enforcement by devoting attention to the numbers as well as what anonymous men and women say about those numbers. Since the police brutality experienced by Rodney King and other less-famous Black men and women in America has now become a national phenomenon, the US Department of Justice should be vigilant in enforcing the law and administration of justice for these victims. We are not aware of other studies that have incorporated findings from the NPMSRP as it relates to police brutality in America after the untimely death of an iconic figure when it comes to the racist nature of Black men in America, along with NPMSRP narrative data to capture the extent and structure of assessments of law enforcement. A benefit of a study of this nature is that it enables researchers to tap into the “true sentiments” of respondents concerning law enforcement that are difficult to tease out when using qualitative interviews or quantitative surveys.

Prior studies that have delved into the topic police brutality, law enforcement perceptions of Black men, and general perceptions of law enforcement have emphasized such things as Afrocentric facial features of Black suspects, DOJ investigations of police departments, racial profiling, sentencing decisions, and disproportionate

incarceration rates, but rarely have studies utilized analysis of NPMSRP statistics and narratives (Blair et al. 2004; Gabbidon and Greene 2013; Staples 2011; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006; Walker 2011). Therefore, perhaps this study can begin a new line of intellectual exploration into the areas of police brutality against Black males, perceptions of Black males by the general media and law enforcement, and perceptions of law enforcement by societal members via major news website headlines and NPMSRP narrative data.

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