

BLACK ENTERPRISE

Silicon Valley Saviors: Tech to End Police Brutality and More Bloodshed

Alton Sterling, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice... the roster of African Americans killed by police just keeps growing. Gun violence is 24/7. It will take technology to alleviate some of this suffering.

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Another long, hot summer, another black man's death by cop. This time, the violence is played out in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Stomach-churning video shows an officer shoot Alton Sterling at point-blank range in the head while Sterling is subdued on the ground.

This, of course, is just the daily dose of gun violence and police brutality making more emotionally immune because these violent acts are so frequent.

The nation is fiercely polarized over racial matters. The NRA and gun advocates are hell-bent on not giving in to even modest gun reform proposals. Gun violence is a 24/7 occurrence.

The only thing that may help us, besides a meteorite and humanity do-over, is technology.

Police and The Body Cam Politic

There are many technologies proposed to curtail police misconduct and deaths at the end of a gun barrel.

For police brutality, officers wearing body cams is an obvious solution. Yet, it's one far from perfect.

After Michael Brown was fatally shot by Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Rep. Emanuel Cleaver II (MO-5) introduced **H.R. 5865, the Camera Authorization and Maintenance Act.**

The H.R. 5865 bill requires law enforcement agencies to supply officers with body cameras or risk losing federal funding. It also proposes a way to help agencies purchase cameras.

As of January 2014, the bill still sits in subcommittee. [*I'm just a bill, yes I'm only a bill and I'm sitting here on Capitol Hill...*]

Watchdog groups and think tanks such as **The Cato Institute** suggest there is evidence that incidents of police misconduct are reduced when officers wear body cams. However, critics say issues of privacy and logistics with data storage and retention make body cams for law enforcement hard to mandate.

Then there's this: The two officers involved in Sterling's death wore body cams. All police in Louisiana are equipped with them.

However, the body cams were reported as having "fallen off" during the incident with Sterling, by the officers.

Hence, the problem with cams. Unless they are embedded into officers' bodies, they can be powered down, covered up, or can "fall off."

Video Everywhere

Before I even finished this essay, which I began yesterday, news of yet another African American man killed by police emerges. The horror of the shooting of Philando Castile is captured in visceral, bloody Facebook Live footage taken by the victim's girlfriend.

There is a meme currently flowing across social media. It's that police brutality hasn't increased, it's just now we can all bear witness via instant video.

Social media and the ubiquity of smartphones have made us all journalists. With that small device in our pocket, we are all harbingers of injustice.

Smart Guns

There has been a lot of talk in recent years about smart guns curbing gun violence. These firearms only discharge if the weapon owner unlocks them using fingerprint biometrics or some other high-tech mechanism.

There are many prototypes, but one developed solution is the iGun. It's a firearm with a microchip. The owner wears a ring with a special system that sends power to the iGun. As the ring comes in close range, the trigger unlocks.

Not a 100% safe solution and certainly not one that would stop incidents of police brutality. But tech that keeps guns more secure could cut down on the accidental shootings that seem to occur daily, and sadly, many of them involving children.

ShotSpotter is another technology addressing guns. It's a system of sensors deployed throughout an area (it's currently used in New York City). The sensors detect when a gun is fired. A signal is transmitted to the area's local police dispatch or to patrol units.

The signal sends metadata with details about the gunfire: exact location, the number of rounds fired, type of gunfire, and more.

ShotSpotter CEO Ralph Clark says this tech can help foster better relationships between citizens and police in their community.

“Our technology makes police more accountable, as well as politicians and leadership, because we have this very independent measure,” he says.

With ShotSpotter, “Police can be more responsive and service-oriented” says Clark, noting that this is especially important in underserved communities where police and community relations may be strained. He knows this firsthand because he grew up in Oakland and witnessed such tensions.

Other Tech Social Justice Solutions

There are other less obvious technologies to save us from our violent selves.

Months ago, I had a conversation with Guy Primus the CEO of The Virtual Reality Company, a virtual reality (VR) content studio. Primus spoke about the capacity for VR to broaden empathy—to allow members of the majority to experience life as a person of color.

The potential for using VR to better train police is vast. A young officer virtually placed in situations where there may be temptation to engage in misconduct or pull a gun too soon could save lives and also allow trainers to see which trainees are best suited to work under pressure.

And there is no shortage of tech entrepreneurs and innovators creating apps that focus specifically on police brutality. A while back, I interviewed Mbye Njie, creator of the Legal Equalizer app; a virtual toolkit for staying safe when pulled over by police. It will send an SOS to your emergency contacts, display your rights, let you record and save video, and more.

It will take technology to help correct the ugliest and most base human behavior. Maybe human law enforcement officers will not exist in the future. Cops may be robots on patrol—machines without prejudice, bias, and quick trigger fingers that will ironically be the things that save more human life from violent, untimely demise.