White people can compartmentalize police brutality. Black people don't have the luxury.

Radley Balko

May 29, 2020

Four years ago, a white man named Daniel Shaver was shot and killed by a police officer in Mesa, Ariz. Shaver, who worked in pest control, was in Mesa on business. While in his hotel room, he showed two acquaintances a pellet gun used to shoo birds out of stores. Someone outside the room saw the gun flash outside the window, and called police. In body cam footage that police were later forced to release, Shaver can be seen unarmed and on all fours, pleading for his life as officers shouted contradictory commands at him. When Shaver reached back to pull up his shorts, Officer Phillip Brailsford shot Shaver dead.

The Shaver video is one of the most haunting and horrifying recordings of police abuse you're ever likely to see. Brailsford — who had a history of excessive force and had engraved the words "You're F****d" on his service weapon — was later acquitted by a jury, reinstated and allowed to retire with a pension and disability pay for the trauma he said he suffered as a result of killing Shaver.

Shaver's death is often brought up by people who are sympathetic to the argument that policing has grown too aggressive and militaristic, but who are skeptical that race has anything to do with it. They ask: Isn't Shaver's death proof that policing isn't necessarily racist, but just too aggressive against everyone? And why didn't Shaver's death spark protests like those seen in Minneapolis and elsewhere since the death of George Floyd?

The answer to the first question is easy. The problems in policing — from militarization to lack of transparency, to misplaced incentives, to the lack of real accountability — certainly do affect everyone, not just black people. According to The Post's database of fatal police shootings, since 2015 police have shot and killed about twice as many white people as black people.

But while police abuse and violence have the potential to harm anyone, as with virtually all of the other shortcomings of the criminal justice system, it disproportionately harms black people. Cops may shoot and kill twice as many white people as black, but there about six times as many white people as black people in the United States. Proportionally, black people are much more likely to be shot and killed by cops.

If we look at shooting deaths of unarmed people, cops have shot and killed about the same number of whites and blacks, which means an even wider racial disparity as a percentage of the population. This is probably because when interacting with black people, police officers seem more likely to see innocuous movements — or even efforts to comply with their orders — as threatening. (As I've written here before, these "unarmed" figures can also be misleading. They often rely on police reports, which tend to portray events in a light favorable to police. They also imply that the deceased was the aggressor. That isn't always the case, such as when police mistakenly or illegally break into an innocent person's home.)

Some will argue that if we consider the rates at which whites and blacks commit crimes, these numbers make more sense. But this doesn't hold up to scrutiny, either. In Minneapolis, for example, a 2018 Star-Tribune investigation of fatal police encounters since 2000 found no correlation between the locations of police shootings and the crime rates of those areas.

These same critics will also argue that blacks commit a disproportionate number of homicides, so we should expect a disproportionate number of blacks to be killed by police. But most deaths at the hands of police are not the result of cops responding to or trying to prevent a murder. They occur when cops are doing other police work such as taking someone into custody, making a traffic stop or raiding a home.

Moreover, there's plenty of data showing that this argument doesn't hold up for other police uses of force. Countless studies have also shown that black people are much more likely to be pulled over and searched for drugs, even though nearly every study on the subject also found that searches of white people are more likely to turn up contraband. (Even when force isn't used, one study of traffic stop transcripts found that police, regardless of the officer's race, use harsher language and are less respectful of blacks than of whites.) Black people are also much more likely to be arrested for both possession and distribution of illegal drugs, even though there's ample data suggesting whites and blacks both use and sell drugs at about the same rate.

At this point, we're about halfway to answering that second question we often hear after one of these videos makes national news: Why don't we see the sorts of protest, outrage and anger when police unjustly kill white people as we do when they unjustly kill black people? To get all the way there, let's look at some more data.

A 2017 NPR/Robert Wood Johnson Foundation poll found that half of blacks said they had been unfairly stopped by a police officer. About 6 in 10 said they or a family member had. That means that if you know two black people, one of them feels they've been treated unfairly by police. Philando Castile, a legal gun owner who was shot and killed during a traffic stop despite by-the-book obedience, had previously been pulled over more than 50 times for petty traffic violations.

Status offers little protection, whether you're a professional tennis player, a fellow police officer, a district attorney or a Republican U.S. senator.

According to a 2015 YouGov/Huffington Post poll, 74 percent of black parents had cautioned their children to be cautious around police, versus 32 percent of white parents. A 2016 Pew poll found that 7 in 10 white people thought police usually use the right amount of force, versus just 1 in 3 black people. A 2017 Pew poll asked police officers if the high-profile police killings of black people were isolated incidents or part of a more systemic problem. More than 7 in 10 white officers said these were isolated incidents, while nearly 6 in 10 black officers said they were signs of a broader problem.

A 2004 Vera Institute of Justice study found that black attitudes about police are shaped far more by personal experiences and the experiences of friends and family than by media coverage. And a 2016 Cato Institute/YouGov survey found that blacks were significantly more likely than whites to report being sworn at by a police officer and experiencing physical violence at the hands of a police officer. They were also five times as likely to expect worse treatment from police because of their race. Perhaps the most revealing survey of all is a YouGov poll last year that found that black people were more worried about being a victim of police violence than being a victim of violent crime.

When white people see video of unjust police abuse of a white person, it may make us angry, sad or uncomfortable, but most of us don't see ourselves in the position of the person in the video. If we're polite and respectful, we think, and don't put ourselves in scenarios that lead to confrontations with police officers, there's little chance that we'll ever end up like Daniel Shaver. When black people see video of Officer Derek Chauvin kneeling on George Floyd's neck, their reaction is much more likely to be that could have been me — or my son, or friend or brother.

Several years ago, as the Ferguson protests raged, I interviewed black residents in St. Louis County, Mo., about the absurd system of fines and fees that funds some of the towns there. They described dozens of interactions with police. Sometimes, they admitted, they had been stopped or detained because they really had committed some infraction. Other stops were fishing expeditions to generate revenue. Some interactions had been relatively straightforward. Some were verbally abusive. Some got physical.

Maybe a cop had had a bad day, or had just come from a bad interaction with someone else. But black residents told me they had to be perfect. Every time. If they lost their patience and objected because this was the fifth or sixth time in a month they'd been stopped, they invited abuse. If they argued, or mistakenly made a furtive movement, they risked a takedown to the asphalt, a baton blow or a Taser, or worse.

It should go without saying that lots of white people have had uncomfortable, horrific and fatal interactions with police — enough, I'm sure, to make them and those who loved them feel empathy for George Floyd and his family. And I'm sure there are black people out there who have only positive experiences with police and don't know anyone who hasn't.

But in general, it seems clear that when confronted with a story about one of their own dying at the hands of police, black people tend to internalize, while white people tend to compartmentalize. A 2019 study in the Lancet found that when police kill an unarmed black person, other black people in that state suffer tangible harm to their collective mental health. The study found no similar effect with white people. It's also notable that the cities where we've seen the most social unrest following high-profile police abuse cases — Baltimore, Ferguson, Cleveland, Chicago, Milwaukee and now Minneapolis — are cities with a well-documented history of police discrimination, abuse and violence. These are the cities where black people were probably more likely to have had their own bad experiences with police and, presumably, more likely to see themselves or someone they know in the shoes of Freddie Gray or Laquan McDonald or Tamir Rice.

It's true that the problems with modern policing pose a risk to everyone, of every race. It's also true that the same problems disproportionately affect black and Latino people. And that discrepancy is why we so rarely see protests for white victims of police violence. If you're white, you can view the footage of Daniel Shaver's death, feel some anger and move on. If you're black, viewing the video of George Floyd's death is a reminder that the throat under Officer Derek Chauvin's knee could easily have been your own.