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GUEST EDITORIAL

A Social Work Perspective on Police Violence: Evidence and Interventions

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In August 2014, Michael Brown, a Ferguson, Missouri, teenager, was shot and killed by a local police officer. His body was left in the street for several hours in the sweltering sun, leaving his community in a state of simultaneous grief and rage. Michael's death set off a tidal wave of unrest beginning in Missouri and sweeping through American cities including Baltimore, New York, St. Paul, Chicago and others, in which Black and Brown people were killed by those who were charged with serving and protecting them. Tragically, in March 2018, we experienced yet another high-profile killing of a young Black person. Twenty-two-year-old father of two Stephon Clark was shot eight times in the back by Sacramento, California, police officers. His grandmother heard the shots ring out in her backyard only to see her grandson lying facedown in the grass. As of March 2018, the community's calls for accountability and justice continue.

Although these extra-judicial killings are not a new phenomenon, the increase in cell phone videos and postings on social media sites has led to a groundswell of advocacy and activism. As more and more instances of deaths and mistreatment have come to light, groups like the Movement for Black Lives have catalyzed a national movement calling for an end to police brutality. Importantly, the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, and others have called attention to the larger issues of economic exploitation of poor communities by local police departments that use fees and fines generated by traffic stops and other interactions with the criminal justice system to fund local governments. Law enforcement, in this sense, does not appear to serve the interest of the people and communities, but law enforcement themselves.

As lay attention to these issues grew, a I and a few colleagues began to ask ourselves about the responsibility of social work scholars to address one of our most enduring and vexing social problems. Historically, social workers were invested in social change and advocacy, particularly on behalf of very vulnerable people. However, in the contemporary moment, social work practice and scholarship has increasingly and overwhelmingly shifted to

research on clinical concerns, mental illness, and/or single-domain interventions. The shift away from social change to individual well-being makes it more difficult to analyze police killings from a multilevel and international social work perspective.

However, because social workers are still bound by our code of ethics to engage at multiple levels, Professor Mo Yee Lee, editor of this journal, and we set out to bring a social work lens to the fight against police violence. Although policing, and its implications, are not typically thought of in the purview of social work practice or scholarship, the relationship between the police and the community has far-reaching consequences for many of the issues in which social workers engage. For example, young people in low-income communities are often monitored for suspected gang affiliations throughout their neighborhoods and on school property (Rios, 2011). This kind of surveillance and constant scrutiny may negatively affect young people's well-being and life outcomes including their mental and physical health, as well as their educational trajectories. Therefore, we argue that thinking deeply and critically about the relationship between the police and the community should be considered squarely in the domain of social work practice and scholarship.

To that end, this special issue lays out several important topics, including an exploration of the intersection among carceral feminism, restorative, justice and domestic violence; a discussion of the epistemic origins of state violence in Canada; a review of the impact of racial profiling on ethno-racial minorities in Calgary; and an empirical study of how residents of Baltimore perceive body-worn police cameras in the aftermath of the death of Freddie Gray Jr. Taken together, the articles highlight the fact that state violence against ethno-racial minorities is not confined to the United States. Rather, the struggle against structural violence is a persistent problem, domestically and internationally.

For example, the work of Erin Kerrison, Jennifer Cobbina, and Kimberly Bender asks us to consider the utility of police body-worn cameras, which were presented as an early effort to curb police violence in the United States. However, Kerrison and colleagues note the mixed empirical evidence regarding their impact. Although the ascendance of cell phone video thrust the problem of extra-judicial killings into the media spotlight, police body-worn cameras seem more vulnerable to manipulation or malfunction than their amateur counterparts. To better understand how Black residents of Baltimore perceive the cameras' effect on civilian safety, Kerrison and colleagues conducted qualitative interviews with 92 adults. Respondents noted that the city of Baltimore faces significant structural challenges that exacerbate violence, including lack of jobs, affordable housing, and access to quality education. However, Black Baltimoreans reported that the police department assumes that Black

people engage in criminal activity and surveils them as a result. Consequently, the combination of structural barriers and mistrust of the police makes it difficult to rely on body-worn cameras as an intervention to prevent, let alone end, police violence. All told, Kerrison and colleagues find that cynicism and despair accurately characterize Black Baltimoreans' view of the police and that cameras are unlikely to correct these long-standing problems.

Using an intersectional framework that explicitly considers gender and race, Mimi E. Kim's work sketches the fissures between the mainstream feminist strategy of using the carceral system to redress sexual violence against women and the growing condemnation of mass incarceration, which disproportionately affects men of color. Kim argues that although activists have successfully elevated violence against women to the national stage, using the criminal justice system to redress these wrongs contributes to the mass incarceration of Black and Brown people. Furthermore, Kim explicitly critiques structural racism as a determinant of incarceration and problematizes the carceral feminist approaches to gender-based violence. Instead, she outlines a new approach that builds on restorative justice practices and pushes further toward "transformative justice." This conceptualization acknowledges the personal and structural conditions that often lead to violence against women and forges a new path in which the focus is shifted from individual perpetrators to communities as a whole. In this manner, the discourse shifts from a neoliberal framing of individual blame to one in which communities may be sites of prevention, intervention, and transformation.

Marjorie Johnstone and Eunjung Lee's piece on police violence in Toronto calls attention to epistemic injustice, or the idea that only some people are believed to be credible knowers of their own experience, particularly vis-à-vis the racialized violence of police killings. They use this theoretical framework to problematize "carding," a Toronto police practice in which ethno-racial minorities are racially profiled. Their work reminds us that too often ethno-racial minorities are questioned when they claim experiences of racism, profiling, or violence. In contrast, the police are viewed as credible perceivers of threats, which are then used to justify the use of lethal force against ethno-racial minorities.

Finally, Hieu Ngo, Kulwant Neote, Cesar Cala, Marichu Antonio, and Jamie Hickey's work analyzes police practices in a Canadian city. This work used a community-based participatory research approach to understand how being racially profiled by the police affects ethno-racial minorities. Ngo and colleagues found that ethno-racial minorities experienced high levels of racial profiling on the streets of Calgary. Moreover, as a result of being targeted by the police, many respondents felt stigmatized or became emotional when describing police encounters. Overall, Ngo and colleagues'

analysis points to the toll racial profiling may take on the well-being of ethno-racial minorities in general.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue suggest important new avenues for social work research, practice, and advocacy. Although the focus on police violence waxes and wanes, social work scholars and practitioners have a responsibility to maintain the emphasis on the structural harms that affect society's most vulnerable people. In addition to consideration of how we might stop police violence, we also need additional research on how to prevent and mitigate the enormous harm done to surviving families and communities. We must also do a much better job of understanding how women of color are directly affected by police violence but remain overlooked in research and political debates on the issue. Finally, we recognize there is far too little emphasis on structural racism and the trauma it leaves behind in its wake. We hope that this special issue brings attention to important scholarship and potential interventions to ameliorate these senseless tragedies.

Reference

Rios, V. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of Black and Latino boys*. NewYork, NY: NYU Press.