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Influence of the Police Force on Black Lives Matter

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Abstract. With the recent revival of the Black Lives Matter movement reaching all corners of the world, I wanted to dive deeper into the topic and figure out what the stem issues were. More precisely, I set my eyes on unearthing what kind of correlation the police force had with the movement. What made the movement change so much this year compared to the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014? Did the cops have any influence on this change? Through my thorough research, I concluded that the decisions made by the police force has influenced both the aim of the Black Lives Matter movement and the purpose as a whole. Due to the conflicts between the police and protesters all over the world, the aim of the Black Lives Matter movement has shifted to future police implications; for the first time in movement history, advocates fought for the defunding of police. Instead of solely focusing on systematic racism and police brutality, protesters spread awareness for topics like defunding the police and removing the usage of loaded firearms. Compared to 2014's movement, which focused on systematic racism and injustice, this year's movement saw a great uprising of police animosity.

Keywords. BLM (Black Lives Matter), defunding, hostility, injustice, racism

Introduction

One of the central political issues today revolves around the idea of inequality and injustice in terms of racial identification. Even after nearly 400 years of progress, America, along with many other nations across the globe, still suffer from racial differentiation. Since the United States was officially established as an independent nation in 1776, racial discrimination has been a primary issue. Even now, nearly 250 years later, African Americans along with other minorities (such as Asians, Native Americans, and Hispanics) face racial prejudice daily. Although it has always been an issue, the Black Lives Matter movement has risen to the forefront of American politics along with becoming the main issue in many nations in 2020.

The Black Lives Matter movement was founded by Alicia Garza along with co-founder Opal Tometi in 2013. The reasoning behind the creation of this movement was to remind and educate people that African Americans in the United States still face discrimination and injustice. Originally started in the United States, this movement has quickly branched out to many other nations across the world. People in London, Seoul, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, and Syria have all taken action to voice their support for the Black Lives Matter movement this year (Kirby, 2020). Although the Coronavirus (COVID-19), an infectious disease that spread like wildfire in 2020, was still running wild around the world, protesters did not allow it to stop them from expressing themselves. Political protests consisting of marches and rallies occurred multiple times every day starting in late May and early July. These protests consisted of peaceful gatherings of Black Lives Matter advocates.

This year, the Black Lives Matter movement has reached unprecedented heights. Previously, Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech in 1963, discussing racial discrimination and how it must come to a stop, was the largest social movement that addressed the need for racial equality. Nearly one million advocates came together, fighting against the oppression of African Americans. Data gathered by the Kaiser Family Foundation along with Civis Analytics and N.O.R.C. estimated that, at the very least, seven million individuals participated in recent demonstrations related to the Black Lives Matter movement. The raw data collected by N.O.R.C. calculated nearly thirty million individuals from June 8 to June 14. What exactly allowed this movement to grow so large? In this paper, I explore the impact of police repression on the evolution of the Black Lives Matter movement. I compare specifically the state of the movement in 2014 compared to its current manifestation in 2020. If there is any difference, has the police force had any influence on it?

Background

The Black Lives Matter movement was founded in late July of 2013. Alicia Garza claimed that this movement was founded after the acquittal of George Zimmerman, the killer of Trayvon Martin. A young African American, Martin was fatally shot by Zimmerman 17 months earlier, in February 2012. After a tedious court case (the State of Florida v. George Zimmerman), Zimmerman was acquitted of charges for second-degree murder and manslaughter, angering the African American community. Many more cases, such as the death of Darren Wilson or Eric Garner (both African American individuals who were killed for unjustified reasons), reminded African Americans about their marginalized position in American society. The justice system in America was seen as discriminatory by African Americans, thus leading to heavy resistance.

A study conducted by Nature revealed that white officers were nearly two times as likely to use force involving guns than were African American officers in general (Peeples, 2020). In areas with higher concentrations of African American individuals, white officers were nearly three times as likely to use guns when making arrests and interacting with suspects. Similar statistics dove deeper into societal issues revolving around racial discrimination that also caused police intervention, thus leading to systematic racism.

In the United States, overall neighborhood poverty continues to characterize African American communities. Neighborhoods consisting of poor schools, limited access to healthcare, and not enough jobs are often seen occupied by a large African American community. The overall residential segregation between African Americans and other ethnicities, mainly white Americans, continues to grow (Dunn, 2020). Due to poor conditions African American children are faced with during childhood, many often stray from the right path and end up committing crimes to stay alive.

According to a study done by Business Insider, minority Americans of the working class are always underappreciated. The per capita income of African Americans compared to white Americans is 42% lower (Gal, Kiersz, Mark, Su, & Ward, 2020). Overall, African Americans residing in America, especially in poorer neighborhoods, grew up struggling and fighting to survive through any means necessary. As a result, the African American communities in America had higher crime rates, leading to more arrests and unjustified actions taken by the police as well. Recognizing the treatment African Americans receive from police, Garza took action and began the Black Lives Matter movement.

Her purpose in creating this movement was to protest against racial discrimination and injustice. Garza recognized that many of these incidents stemmed from the police force; cases like the death of Tamir Rice—a 12-year-old African American boy living in Cleveland who was fatally shot for carrying a replica toy gun—and Eric Garner—who was killed due to

suffocation from being placed in a chokehold by a New York Police Department (NYPD) officer—depicted the discrimination African Americans faced in terms of police justice.

Early 2014 marked an important time for the Black Lives Matter movement as well as its advocates. Gaining nation-wide recognition, this movement saw great amounts of support from all kinds of minorities as well as white Americans. In many countries, a large portion of the Black Lives Matter advocates were Asian Americans, Hispanics, or white Americans. According to Pew Research, only around 20% of the Black Lives Matter protesters were African Americans. Almost half of the total protesters were white Americans (Barroso & Minkin, 2020).

Large public protests were held this year for the first time since the movement began a year ago. Towards the end of 2014, a mall had to shut down due to a massive rally in a Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota (Associated Press, 2014). In comparison to the events that took place that year, the shutdown of the mall was unprecedented. People began to take notice, recognizing the sheer significance of what the Black Lives Matter movement was fighting for. Unlike previous events that only saw public rallies and marches, the shutdown of the mall depicted the bigger picture. Nearly a thousand protesters gathered in one area, fighting for what they believe in. This event made the news, gaining coverage on all kinds of news channels. As a result, the movement garnered a lot of traction. Within the next week, all races, including white individuals, crowded the streets of Minnesota and many other states.

In 2014, the focus of the Black Lives Matter movement was on the inequality and injustices that African Americans felt from the government, as well as police forces in the United States. At this time, the movement was mainly concentrated in the United States. Although it was seen as an important issue for the rest of the world, the fight for inequality was primarily set in the United States. Many protests and rallies garnered larger followings, allowing for more voices to speak up and protest against the government. The protesters, however, understood the importance of the police force, recognizing their duty to serve them. The consensus was “don’t categorize a group of people because of one person” (Black Lives Matter, 2020). Protesters acknowledged that there were those willing to serve all under the American flag equally, fighting for the right causes.

A primary example of the relation between protesters and police during this time was seen in Ferguson, Missouri. On August 14, 2014, a group of nearly fifty protesters made their way through West Florissant Avenue. Although the march of the protesters was seen as a great disturbance to cars driving by, police officers patrolling the area decided it was best to come to a compromise rather than to reject the group of protests. The police told the protesters to continue protesting but on the sidewalk instead of private property (CBS News, 2014). Early that week, lawmakers in Ferguson made changes to their regulations, calling for a much calmer relation between the police and protesters. Events like this took place all across the nation. As a result, the majority of protests held in public areas in America were peaceful and served as an opportunity for African Americans and other races to speak up against the racial discrimination that still existed in society. Protesters still strongly believed that real change could be made and that their efforts would lead to the bettering of conditions for African Americans along with other minorities living in America.

Present Situation

Nearly six years later, the Black Lives Matter movement has made its way to the front of many headlines once again. Similar to 2014, the cause of this recent rejuvenation was the death of George Perry Floyd Jr. On May 25th, 2020, Floyd was killed during an arrest for allegedly using a counterfeit \$20 bill. This event took place in Minneapolis. The officer involved in Floyd’s death, Derek Chauvin, knelt on the victim’s neck for nearly eight minutes.

Although controversial, the cause of Floyd's death was later revealed to be positional asphyxia through an independent autopsy (Pereira, 2020). Compared to the autopsy presented to the public, the independent autopsy revealed the truth: Derek Chauvin, the man who knelt on Floyd's neck, had caused asphyxiation. As a result, the public recognized how black Americans are being treated. As the public was convinced that the death may have been due to Floyd's underlying health conditions, this independent autopsy report led to suspicions rising. People began to question the honesty of the government as the idea was that the government was attempting to cover up the incident.

In response to this traumatic event, the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 became a global movement. Through many means, such as social media, news outlets, and independent journalists, the news of the homicide committed by white police officer Derek Chauvin ran wild. Gaining high amounts of public exposure, Floyd's death served as a wakeup call for African Americans and advocates of equality all around the world. Only a couple of days after his death, protests were reignited in the United States. Local protesters in Minneapolis began the chain of protests that were to follow.

In addition to the domestic protests, all around the world, especially in regions where racial injustice was a salient issue, the spread of the Black Lives Matter ideals in Minneapolis reignited their stance. Coming together, countries like France, South Korea, and Germany saw public protests nearly every day of the week. On June 11, 2020, nearly 15,000 anti-racism protesters gathered at Place de la République near central Paris. Protesters and French police clashed; in response to rocks being thrown at them by protesters, the police fought back with the use of tear gas. France is also a prime context for the Black Lives Matter movement advocates, as they received nearly 15,000 complaints against police officers in 2019. More than half of these complaints were for alleged violence.

In South Korea, public rallies were held in many regions. On June 20, a protest was held near Gwangalli Beach. Nearly 200 people of different ethnic backgrounds handed out hand sanitizers and greeted those who passed by. This group included military service members serving in South Korea, teachers from different countries, and African Americans born in South Korea. People took notice of the signs they were holding; the signs read, "Black Lives Matter" (Ock, 2020). Although the general population in South Korea consists of mainly natives, protesters had the opportunity to speak to anybody interested in the movement and what it stands for. Over the years, the nation of South Korea has grown to include diverse communities of immigrants, transitioning from their once ethnically homogenous communities. Michael Hurt, who lectures on cultural theory at the Korea National University of Arts, said despite resentment from the past, "There's a broader exposure and a more sympathetic view these days" (Strother, 2020).

In Germany, racial discrimination has always been a large issue. A report by the German Federal Anti-Discrimination Agency (ADS) stated that nearly 33% of all complaints received were for racial injustices or discrimination (Bosen, 2020). Although German demographics indicate that nearly only 0.1% of the population in Germany consists of African Americans, the issue of racial discrimination was still considered to be one of the leading social issues in the nation. Because Germany did not gain much legal support for victims, it was difficult for the advocates to stand up for themselves. But thanks to the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement several months ago, the Germans voiced their strong advocacy for racial equality.

Unlike the protests that occurred in 2014, however, 2020 saw many riots around the world. Rioters armed themselves with weapons including guns and bats. Originally meant to peacefully fight against police brutality and systematic racism, protests began to turn violent, causing severe damage to buildings and other property. Arming themselves with tear gas, riot shields, and rubber-bullet guns, the police force fought back, harming those involved as well as property. So far, there are nearly 20 reported cases of deaths caused by protests in the United

States, half of whom were reported to be African American individuals (Dunn, 2020). These individuals participated in violent protests, many of the cases being deaths caused by police aggression.

Not only has this year's protests involved riots, but also mass sprees of looting have occurred. The act of stealing and robbing different kinds of stores became a common placeholder during mass gatherings for protests in the United States primarily. However, the concern of looting also branched out, occurring in other countries as well. Belgium saw over 200 arrests these past few months due to looting and riots (Galindo, 2020). These lootings, although seemingly caused by irresponsible and immoral individuals simply wanting to steal, are caused by individuals wanting to depict how their country is corrupt at its core (Khazan, 2020). By looting, protesters were also able to get reactions from the police, often leading to mass riots. Groups of looters were also seen as targeting symbols of authority. The CNN Center in Atlanta was severely damaged as rioters continued breaking the building's windows and entering (Alfonso III, 2020). Other instances saw rioters damaging and stealing from police cars.

This year, protests have been met with strong repression by the police force serving to protect property and the nation from potential danger. The majority of Black Lives Matter advocates viewed the police as dangerous, causing many to feel contempt towards the police. Many protests, especially those in the United States, saw protesters intentionally attacking and provoking police officers who were on duty. In response, the police force across the United States struck back on many occasions, leading to thousands of protesters in jail and severely injuring others. The International Crisis Group claims that the police had used excessive force. A protest in New York City held on the 30th of May saw officers in a police SUV driving at a crowd of protesters. A day before this took place, a police officer in New York City was seen shoving a woman to the ground during a demonstration. She was later sent to the hospital where she later suffered a seizure and concussion. Protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement this year have seen more exposure, uniting people all across the globe to support this movement. On the other hand, it has caused a lot of people injuries and property damage, sometimes even leading to death.

The Impact of Police Repression on Protest Dynamics

So what exactly was the impact of police repression on the Black Lives Matter protests and how did it influence the overall trajectory of the movement? Due to the changes seen in relations between the public and the police force, protests were held in much larger crowds and in public areas where it would be easy to fight against the police if necessary. Cities like New York City were hotspots for public protests. Protesters were often seen mocking and insulting police stationed at the protest spots to protect the city in case of an emergency. Crowds of hundreds sometimes incited the police to take action to restrain civilians. For example, a group of young African Americans attending one of the public rallies in Ferguson attempted to throw makeshift Molotov and rocks at the police line (KMOV, 2020). When confronted, the group claimed that they deliberately threw Molotov at the police to get a reaction and motivate them to fight back. Incidents like this happened all across the United States, often occurring multiple times a day. During the public rallies in 2014, there was only one recorded incident of civilians consciously attempting to encourage the police to fight back.

So what caused the heavy repression of the police in 2020? Why were protests in 2014 and 2015 much more peaceful? Since 2014, there have been many cases similar to that of George Floyd's death. Police brutality was nothing new in 2014. However, as time went on, Black Lives Matter advocates in the United States began to realize that there has been no change made by the government in order to tackle police brutality. After nearly six years of cumulative

cases of police brutality towards African Americans, advocates of the Black Lives Matter movement realized it was finally enough. After minimal change and no real attention to the topic, protesters began to stir up once again.

Another cause for the mass influence of George Floyd's death was because the whole altercation was documented. The body cam on the patrol officers as well as recordings by nearby civilians captured nearly eight minutes of footage. Previously, people have only been aware of police brutality. News reports as well as published articles simply relayed information. It was very uncommon for there to be live footage of the altercation. For many, it was their first time visually seeing what police brutality really was. Enraging many, the video went viral. Protesters and advocates from all around the world expressed their disbelief, further strengthening the repression of the police. Overall, the repression of the police force during this year's ongoing protests has caused more bloodshed, discord, and animosity between the protesters and the police force.

Taking a deeper look into the list of demands and goals of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2014, the sole purpose was to address the oppression and injustice of African Americans in the United States (Black Lives Matter, 2020). As the movement was yet to reach global heights, the focus was more on states that had denser African American populations. For example, states like Texas, Florida, New York, North Carolina, Louisiana, and of course, Minneapolis were the prime targets for the Black Lives Matter movement and its ideas. The movement and its advocates voiced their strong will in regards to the mistreatment of African Americans in general, may it be from the police or the government. Their goal was to "end the war on black people," according to the movement's demands published in 2016.

However, 2020 saw the movement take a different approach. After the police were seen engaging in physical altercations with protesters all across the globe, the issue of police brutality came to life. According to reports, the final straw was the altercation between two Buffalo, New York, police officers, and a 75-year-old protester. The protester, Martin Gugino, was part of the group marching in Buffalo on June 15, 2020 (Rose & Levenson, 2020). Gugino was seen standing in front of the police officers. He did not make contact with the officers. After asking him to move, the officers felt it was necessary to shove Gugino to the ground with excessive force. From the video recorded live at the event, Gugino hit his head hard on the concrete floor. It was later revealed that he had a fractured skull and was unable to walk.

After this event spread like wildfire, the Black Lives Matter organization, led by Alicia Garza, shifted the goals and demands of their movement. The reason behind this event gaining attention from all social groups was the visual image of a police officer physically abusing an elderly man who seemed to be in a state of vulnerability. Gugino was not armed, nor was he wearing any protective equipment. Wearing casual clothes, Gugino was not a suspicious individual nor was he enticing the police officers to take action against him. There were many more similar cases. Police officers all around the country took unnecessary action against protesters. In Denver, on June 6, 2020, police officers were firing pepper rounds at the crowd of protesters when a middle-aged white man along with his pregnant wife was caught amid the shooting. He told the police officers to stop shooting, and that he had a pregnant girlfriend inside the car, but they continued to shoot (Jackson, 2020). On June 11, 2020, an officer in the NYPD was seen ripping off an African American protester's mask and pepper-spraying him for simply protesting (Byfield, 2020). All over the world, the police were treating protesters of all races unfairly. As a result, starting from the Gugino incident, the police were prime targets for the protesters. Not only did the African American advocates fight back, but also the white advocates along with all other minorities felt they were being oppressed by the police.

Albeit the overall goal was indeed to end the oppression of African Americans around the world, there was also heavy talk about defunding the police in many states. On July 6, 2020,

the official Black Lives Matter website published an article depicting what exactly defunding the police means and why it is necessary. The Black Lives Matter Global Network started a new trend, naming it the “#DefundPolice” movement. Earlier, on May 30, 2020, the official Black Lives Matter website had published articles calling for the end of systematic racism. However, towards the end of the article, the movement claimed that it was necessary to defund the police nationally. The hope was that, with the defunding of the police, there would be more economic relief for African American communities and poorer neighborhoods. A separate petition began on Change around the same time, garnering nearly 10,000 signatures within the first few days of the petition going live (Jorgensen, 2020). There were also petitions focused on the use of firearms during altercations by the police. These petitions garnered heavy traction. The official petition on Change.org focused on George Floyd’s death and helping his family, which now has nearly twenty million signatures. Many of the petitions focusing on the Black Lives Matter movement and its ideas quickly grew popular, and soon enough, made its way to the front page of the website.

The police force was seen as particularly threatening this year. Once considered the ally of civilians, the police were seen as a dangerous force that civilians had to fight against. Back in 2013 or 2014, policemen and security members were something the public was a lot more fond of; protesters still encouraged peaceful protests in hopes of uniting together with the police force. Many protests also saw cops involving themselves. At the time, the New York Police Department had around 20,000 officers on patrol. Nearly 60% of patrol officers were either African American, Hispanic, or Asian. As a large portion of one of the largest municipal police departments in the United States, the African American police officers within the NYPD also organized protests and participated in them. However, this year, we have seen not only the bloodshed between the civilian protesters and the police force but also the repression of cops in general.

Conclusion

Over the years, the Black Lives Matter movement has seen significant growth, allowing advocates to voice their thoughts and beliefs all across the world. Created to fight systematic racism and racial injustice in the United States, the Black Lives Matter movement has seen great development and impact on society today. With the ever-growing concept of equality and justice, countries around the world had an opportunity to join hand in hand and fight against systemic racism. However, events that took place during the 2014 Black Lives Matter movement compared to the 2020’s movement contrasted vastly. The consensus among advocates six years ago was that there was systematic racism and that was the main issue. The underlying problems were also identified to be wrong approaches to fixing systematic racism or the necessity of recognizing social equality.

However, in 2020, the idea has somewhat strayed from its original purpose of fighting systematic racism. Even though the main concern is systematic racism, and it always will be, views about the underlying problems have diversified. Now, many have shifted their attention to tackling the police force and how they have too much power; others have focused on police brutality directed towards African Americans. There has been heavy talk in regards to defunding and removing the police in general.

It is important to recognize that the idea of defunding the police and directing the money towards poor neighborhoods and those in need sounds like a practical idea, but completely defunding the police would benefit none. At first, it may seem to work; police brutality would be no more, and African Americans and all advocates of the Black Lives Matter movement would be able to protest in peace. Sooner or later, however, individuals who take advantage of having no police nor a proper justice system would rise. Not unlike how looters were stealing

for the sole purpose of personal benefit, defunding the police would shed light on a similar problem.

Instead of defunding the police, the best route would be to limit the power policemen have. By restricting their arsenal, the police would still be able to make their arrests and interrogate suspects, but through much safer means. As some would take advantage of having lethal weapons on hand, the use of rubber bullets instead of real bullets may prove to be a safer alternative. Like this, limitations to the power the police have may be a much safer and beneficial substitute to both the safety of citizens and protesters and the nation as a whole. It is important to remember that the purpose of instituting police officers is to keep the nation safe from all kinds of things, ranging from terrorist attacks to property damage.

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