

Chapter 39

Black Lives Matter, Police Lives Matter: Conflict Resolution Strategies to Resolve Violent Group Demonstrations

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ABSTRACT

Throughout 2020 there have been numerous protests bringing attention to police brutality against minorities. Most of these demonstrations associated with the Black Lives Matter movement have been peaceful, yet news media has focused mainly on those that have been hostile. The police response of countering aggression with aggression often makes these situations more violent and increases the probability of similar protests in the future. This chapter will examine the history of policing as it relates to race relations while exploring several high-profile cases of police brutality against minorities over the past 30 years. The chapter will also discuss how police training, rhetoric, and increased militarization has fractured the police relationship with minorities in their communities. Since it is more realistic to change the police approach to these violent encounters than it is to change the actions of civilians, the chapter calls for reform while providing potential solutions from the field of conflict resolution to help police mitigate these hostile situations.

INTRODUCTION

News media reports throughout the year of 2020 have been dominated by three main topics: the presidential election, COVID-19, and demonstrations throughout the nation, organized as part of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, protesting social injustices levied against minorities by police agencies. Of these events, the topic that has generated arguably the most varied emotional response among citizens has been instances where national protests have turned violent, resulting in property damage, attacks on fellow citizens, and assaults on law enforcement personnel. To some, these displays of mass or group

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violence are viewed as justified while to others, these acts have been met with harsh criticisms and condemnation. Opponents of these violent acts frequently express displeasure in such tactics as they believe that bringing awareness to events of social injustice would have been more effective by taking part in other, more civil tactics. On the other hand, participants of these aggressive acts, as well as others who understand the plight of these individuals, are left further frustrated as their voice to address these injustices have been routinely ignored or suppressed on numerous occasions in the past. To them, these violent demonstrations are essentially viewed as their last justified resort as other, peaceful, methods have done little to nothing to prevent future acts of injustice against minorities from happening.

While our country has witnessed thousands of demonstrations across the nation over the course of the past few months, only a very small percentage of these events have turned violent (Kishi & Jones, 2020). Yet, it is these hostile situations that receive the most media attention and elicit strong emotional reactions from those viewing the news report. Regardless of one's perception of these event, most, if not all, people would agree that there needs to be a resolution to the violence. The first step in reaching a solution is to have a difficult conversation regarding the reasons these hostile demonstrations are taking place.

This chapter seeks to begin this type discussion. Over the next few pages, precipitating events that have led to these protests and riots associated with the Black Lives Matter movement will be examined. The alleged acts of social injustice perpetrated by law enforcement against citizens of color is not a new phenomenon (Kishi & Jones, 2020; Spruill, 2016; Mitchell & Caudy, 2015). As will be shown, the current frustrations being displayed over these injustices have essentially been an accumulation of emotions that has built up, at minimum, over the past 30 years. To many, these acts of alleged police brutality and the chronic emotions resulting from these events have shaped the way they perceive the law enforcement institution. While perceptions can frequently be faulty, it must be recognized that our perception of people, things, and events form our reality – in other words, if we perceive it to be true, it must be true.

Additionally, this chapter will focus considerably on factors related to our law enforcement institution that intentionally or unintentionally lead to friction between the officers enforcing the law and the citizens they serve, especially those of color. The deliberate focus on law enforcement should not be construed as implying that fault for the protests and riots associated with the Black Lives Matter movement as lying with the police. The choice to concentrate on the police is primarily due to the fact that philosophical and behavioral change within the police organization is more realistic, since they serve the public and operate under the mandate of governments, than attempts to enact the same type change among the public. Additionally, since individuals who enter the profession of law enforcement take an oath to present and conduct themselves in a manner that is of a higher professional level than the average citizen, the argument can be made that any necessary change to reduce the need for public demonstrations, especially those that are violent, should begin with the police.

Lastly, the chapter will offer suggestions as to how to address issues or circumstances that could lead or have led to public demonstrations or violent riots. The suggestions that are offered are tactics that have been gleaned from the field of alternative dispute resolution. While the police may have lawful authority to make arrests on individuals taking part in unlawful protests or riots, what is within their lawful duty may not always be the best option to handle the situation. Unfortunately, aside from making an arrest, most officers have not been trained or taught how to effectively resolve conflict.

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