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Police Violence: a Crisis of Masculinity?



Photograph by Nathaniel St. Clair

The numbers tell the sad story.

As of September 2020, 721 people have been shot to death by the police and, of them, 96 percent (694) were male and 4 percent (27) were female. This was same percentage of police killings in 2019 when, out of a total of 1,004 people who were killed, 96 percent (961) were male and 4 percent (43) were female. A similar pattern is evident in the breakdowns of police killings for 2017 and 2018.

A similar pattern of police killings was evident during the period of 1980 thru 1998 when 98 percent of those killed were males. Of those killings, over half (56%) were White people while about two-fifths (42%) were Black people. During the period of 1976 to 1998, the FBI

[reports](#) “8,578 felons were justifiably killed by police”; killings by police were referred to as “justifiable homicides” and the persons that police killed were referred to as “felons.”

A [revealing study](#) by two Columbia University law professors, Jeffrey Fagan and Alexis Campbell, examines the racial character of police killings. They found that between 2015 and 2018, there were 3,757 “police-involved fatalities.” They note that just over half (51.9%) of those killed were White and about one in four (25.2%) were Black. In addition, just under one in five (18.7%) were Latinx and the remaining 4 percent were Asians, Pacific Islanders, Native Americans and Others.

Killing of civilians is [endemic to policing](#). But are police killings of males a social ritual or an expression of a deeper aspect of masculinity?

[Aurelia Terese Alston](#) points out, “Policing is a male dominated field with a culture of hyper-masculinity.” The [FBI reports](#) for 2017 there were a total of 956,941 “law enforcement employees” in the U.S and, of these, 73 percent were male and 27 percent were female. In 2013, 88 percent of full-time law enforcement employees were men.

More disturbing, as the [American Psychology Association](#) reports, “men commit 90 percent of homicides in the United States and represent 77 percent of homicide victims. They’re the demographic group most at risk of being victimized by violent crime.”

There is a tragic dialectic between masculinity and policing killings that has peculiar meaning today as the rate of police killings – especially of Black and Latino males — remain high. How this dialectic plays out may suggest the deeper changes now remaking American society.

Being a “man” today is a challenge. Once upon a time, American culture was grounded in a traditional notion of “hypermasculinity” that some have referred to as “hegemonic masculinity.” It has been [defined](#) as follows:

... a set of values, established by men in power that functions to include and exclude, and to organize society in gender unequal ways. It combines several features: a hierarchy of masculinities, differential access among men to power (over women and other men), and the interplay between men’s identity, men’s ideals, interactions, power, and patriarchy.

Some suggest that the concept derives from Antonio Gramsci and reflects “a position of dominance attained through relative consensus rather than regular force, even if underpinned by force.” It is a tension that is grounded in a belief that links masculinity to the traditional notion of the “breadwinning,” the family provider.

In the good-old days – which, of course, never truly existed – pure masculinity was grounded in patriarchy and the authoritarian power of the male, be he a god, king, warrior, boss, husband or simply the guy next door. In those days, the archetype “man” was without question heterosexual, physically strong and muscular, sexually dominant, unemotional, stoic and non-communicative, and committed to the hierarchal power of the status quo.

However, the relentless, grinding commodification of daily life under capitalism has stripped most of traditional patriarchy of its power. The reducing of nearly all social relations to market-mediated exchanges contributed to the slow but determined rise female power that helped erode the once-mythologized and real power of the hyper-masculine male. One consequence is that the 21st century male is “sensitive,” emotional, multi-sexual and questioning of the status quo. However, males often earn less than females and women are earning more higher education degrees than males.

Sadly, the traditional link between patriarchy and hypermasculinity has come to be represented by blue-collar or working-class men, represented by construction and factory employees, fireman and policemen. [Frank Rudy Cooper](#), a law professor at University of Las Vegas, points out, “Working class men who take orders or lack status in other ways often resort to hypermasculinity in an attempt to regain social status.”

Cooper links masculinity to policing: “Not surprisingly, given the working-class backgrounds of most policemen, there is a close association between hypermasculinity and police work.” He warns, the “association is seen in the qualifications for the job: the size requirements, upper body strength prerequisite, and the ability to beat someone into submission.” Susan Martin, an authority of women and policing, adds, “Since a key element of policing — gaining and maintaining control of situations — remains associated with manhood, male officers do gender along with doing dominance.”

Some analysts note the same link between patriarchy and hypermasculinity among poor and working-class men of color. [Ann McGinley](#), a law professor at University. of Nevada, notes that “young black men from poor urban neighborhoods who adopt the ‘cool pose’” expresses a version of hypermasculinity that “emphasizes toughness and invincibility.”

The link between patriarchy, hypermasculinity and policing is grounded in what Cooper identifies as “command presence.” “An officer has command presence when he projects an aura of confidence. ... He demonstrates it [hypermasculinity] by showing people that he is in charge [that is] antithetical to policing based on negotiation and problem-solving.” In this way, he decisively shows that he is not acting in a “feminine” manner.

Hypermasculinity in policing is most clearly expressed through the “punishment of disrespect.” Cooper claims such punishment “stems from the fact that police officers demand deference to the badge. In doing so, they often act more out of a desire to preserve their authority to enforce the law.” Harlan Hahn grounds a police officer’s “authority” in his ability “to enforce a law.” Cooper argues that such notes that the “political opportunity to control other men to be a major attraction of the job.” He adds, a “policeman’s fear that a challenge to his authority is a challenge to his manhood”

During the Cold War era of the 1950s, masculinity was in flux. The old model of post-Civil War era notion of masculinity was based in a man’s ability to produce and declined in the

wake of WW-II. It was superseded by the new “white collar” model of masculinity based on managerial authority, service-based output and family-oriented lifestyle. in influence. As [Thomas Andrew Joyce](#) observed, “One’s manliness was communicated to other men through visible success in the marketplace.”

The postwar period saw a second challenge to traditional notions of masculinity. The sociologist Michael Kimmel, in “[Masculinity as Homophobia](#),” identifies this challenge as “homophobia.” It was not a fear of homosexuality but “the fear that other men will unmask us, emasculate us, and reveal to us and the world that we do not measure up ... the fear of being seen as a sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood.”

A half-century late, masculinity is being increasingly split between hypermasculinity and the more “sensitive” male. This tension seems to be reverberating within the law-enforcement establishment as reflected by the high level of police killings and the growing efforts to humanize policing. These efforts are being promoted by those championing such efforts as “community policing” and “defunding police.”

However, without humanize the “masculinity” associated with policing, with uphold “law and order,” police killing of other men will not fundamentally change.

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