

Considerations on “Police Brutality” and the Power of Negativity

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We are awash in negative news in our modern, multi-channel information age. Natural disasters seem to follow one upon the heels of another: terrorist attacks from Scandinavia to sub-Saharan Africa dominate headlines; endless wars are pushed to the second page as other, fresh dramatic events usurp the leading role; new and frightening diseases seem to sprout overnight. Studies of modern media reveal that the ratio of negative stories to positive stories is approximately 17 to 1. It has become increasingly clear that negativity sells, and that increasing negativity whets the appetite for more.

We may find it convenient these days to blame the media for this deluge of negative information. Indeed, some have virtually made a sport of blaming the media – for pretty much everything. Scientists believe, however, that the problem is much deeper than the 24/7 assault on our senses from media outlets. We tend to forget that we have a lot in common with dogs, raccoons, pigs, etc. – just as they are beings of instincts, so are we. Our ancestors who exhibited traits of pessimism and caution tended to live longer by virtue of hypervigilance; they were less likely to be bitten, eaten or to fall, hence more likely to live long enough to pass their traits to children. Scientists suggest that this process created a greater tendency in human kind to expect the worst and be relieved when it does not occur. This tendency, consequently, is an artifact inherent from our days as both predator and prey, a natural predisposition that hinders our ability to be fully objective when we consider the reality of the human condition. We consider ourselves (naively) to be enlightened, yet those instincts apparently still roam within our being. In part based upon this instinctual foundation, scientists have noted that the modern American is far more likely to be drawn to the negative, the nasty and the dramatic in the media than a positive story.

This greater societal phenomenon has plainly not sidestepped the realm of police work. Indeed, it appears that our native propensity is most vigorously spurred within the public perception of policing. The question is, why the apparent heightened enthusiasm toward the negative with regard to policing as opposed to other civil endeavors?

While I have not yet found any research to support the theory, it seems that part of this enhanced negativity toward policing stems from a greater societal awareness of underlying social justice inequity and a greater appreciation for lingering and deleterious effects of historic discrimination. As society becomes increasingly aware of continuing inequities there is a growing, well-founded perception that we must do more to balance the scales. Society is plainly also feeling an increasing collective guilt overly these lingering issues. Guilt leads to a desire to make amends, to correct the harm. The issues, however, are incredibly complicated, and like all complicated social issues, well-meaning people often shy away from the burden of frank, objective and difficult

discussions and evaluations. Instead, in a rush to remedy they often resort to another natural but highly problematic response – scapegoating.

The flood of negative media tying law enforcement to perceived, ongoing social injustice acts as a catalyst for this guilt-based desire to cure; it can be easy to see law enforcement as the primary force in society's ongoing inequity. As a result, an increasingly progressive population eager to escape its own guilt finds a ready scapegoat in law enforcement – and an easy means of avoiding the true complexity of the underlying problems. Combined with the human tendency to dwell in the negative, this call for greater social justice creates a perfect storm for negative attitudes about policing.

The reality, fortunately, is that things are not getting worse – far from it. While there is room to debate whether the astoundingly positive progress in virtually all measurable indexes of human wellness might not continue on its current upward trend, there is no doubt that humanity is dramatically better off today than it was 50, 100, or 200 years ago. In a July 28, 2017 article in *The Guardian*, “Is the World Really Better than Ever?” Oliver Burkeman provides an insightful and thought-provoking evaluation of the growing body of evidence that the plight of mankind is dramatically improving. Burkeman notes, for example, that only in the last few years has the percentage of the world's population living in extreme poverty dropped to below 10%. Positive changes abound across the board – even global carbon emissions have not raised in three years. Indeed, Berkman notes that a newspaper could have had the headline “NUMBER OF PEOPLE IN EXTREME PROPERTY FELL BY 137,000 SINCE YESTERDAY,” *every day since 1992*. Even giant pandas have made a comeback and are no longer listed on as endangered. So why are we so glum?

Hans Rosling, now famous for his TED Talk presentations, has noted that our tendency toward negativity is not merely the result of ignorance; it is largely the result of preconception – perhaps the instinct of pessimism. Rosling dramatically demonstrates just how successful mankind has been at improving the human condition over the last 50 years in a pair of TED Talks available on YouTube: “How not to be ignorant about the world,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sm5xF-UYgdg>, and “The best stats you’ve ever seen,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hVimVzgtD6w>. In the former Rosling provides, for example, dramatic evidence that – despite the common perception that women worldwide remain vastly behind men in the number of years of formal education – the reality is that women worldwide have very nearly caught up to men. He notes by further example that despite common perception that many more people are dying in natural disasters now than a hundred years ago, the reality is that a mere fraction are. In the latter talk, Rosling provides UN data that shows that infant mortality, life expectancy, and wealth equity have all dramatically improved globally since the 1950s. While this information should not be used to suggest that all is right in the world, it should provide us at least passing optimism. Perhaps mankind might actually find a

way to live up to its potential – and to its moral obligations. Unfortunately, blaring negativity and human predisposition keeps us down.

In a similar vein, statistics on police/public interactions show general improvement. The national trend over the past several decades has been toward a decrease in the percentage of times police use force when compared to all police contacts with citizens. Some specific statistics are quite dramatic: the number of police officer involved shootings in New York City, for example, fell by two thirds between 1992 and 2014, from 332 down to 105. As described by Steven Malanga, summarizing Bureau of Justice Statistics in “What the Numbers Say on Police Use of Force” in *City Journal* (Dec. 4, 2014), the numbers are falling consistently across virtually all categories. In 1996, for example, Justice Department researchers estimated that 45 million Americans had some sort of contact with law enforcement, or about 21% of the population aged 16 and older. By 2011, the total number of contacts between civilians and law enforcement dropped to approximately 40 million, or 17% of the 16-and-older population. Statistics also reported a significant decline in the number of individuals who reported that the police used force in their contacts, from 664,000 in 2002 to 574,000 in 2010 – a decline of almost 15%. Significantly, the declines were consistent regardless of race. Reports by African-Americans of police use of force fell from 173,000 in 2002 to 130,000 in 2010, a decline of nearly 25% (whites reported a decline from 374,000 to 347,000, or about 8%). The statistics showed similar declines within prison populations, where the average mortality per 100,000 prisoners decreased to 128 in 2012 from 151 in 2000 (African-American mortality dropped from 127 to 109 in the same timeframe, a 14% drop).

The bottom line is that just as many people are mistaken in their belief that the human condition overall is worsening, so too are they mistaken in believing that there has been a recent surge in so-called "police brutality." The reality is on a statistical basis individuals are less likely to have any contact with police today than they were 30 years ago, and rather dramatically less likely to have police use force in those encounters.

As noted, however, law enforcement seems to be particularly vulnerable to the maelstrom of instinctive predisposition and negative media coverage. While I do not know the statistics on it, I would bet that the ratio of negative to positive stories involving the police is substantially worse than the general 17 to 1 ratio. I once inquired of a long-established Seattle newspaper reporter why he spent so much time criticizing police and so little time praising them. His response? "Ted, it isn't news when the police do their job correctly, it's only news when they do not." Left in its current guise, this reality would seem to foreshadow a continuing decrease in public confidence in the validity and propriety of police behavior, in contradiction of the real circumstances.

The challenge for law enforcement is how to encourage people to recognize the continuing improvements within citizen/police interactions as a catalyst to opening a broader conversation on the complexities of the underlying problems. Police must find

a way to get people to understand the overwhelmingly positive role they play in the safety and security of their communities; the sooner police can minimize their role as scapegoats, the sooner a serious conversation on the issues and potential solutions can begin.

Many in the LE community are pessimistic that the perception can change. We have a real potential to staunch the bleeding, however. The reality is that police chiefs and sheriffs across the nation have tremendous public relations power from the bully pulpit; if they call a press conference to discuss a serious event in their community, significant statistical improvements, or any number of other positive potential police involved issues, the media *will* come; a story *will* be printed or broadcast. For reasons that are unclear, however, it appears that the great majority of chiefs and sheriffs are completely reluctant to mount the bully pulpit. In some instances it may be because they get terrific pressure from other branches of government to remain silent; elected leaders, after all, can and do gain political capital from leveraging the social injustice swell that is capturing our urban cores. Piling on police criticism provides an easy connection to many progressive voters, and it cuts against that narrative if police chiefs educate their constituents on the real improvements in the citizen/law-enforcement relationship. This reluctance also almost certainly stems from the law enforcement institutional history of silence in the public realm.

Notwithstanding what condition actually drives the apparent reluctance to educate their constituents, it behooves all of us with an interest in high quality law-enforcement and civil and social justice to continue to encourage our law enforcement leaders to speak out. A good public information officer is invaluable to a department's relationship with its constituents, but it is the chief or the sheriff that carries the real influence. Many of our fellow citizens simply want to hear the counter-narrative to the criticism and embellishments that typically dominate both the mainstream and social media channels. That counter-narrative should plainly and objectively accept the need for greater equity while emphasizing the incredibly important role that law enforcement plays in the safety and security of our greater society, the limitations of policing, and the improvements realized year after year. We do our law enforcement officers a grave disservice by not providing that honest counter-narrative. The need is urgent; the anti-police narrative is rapidly gaining momentum and may become an un-remediable fact if not soon confronted.

The thoughts expressed above are the author's alone (who else would claim them?!), are at least potentially half-baked, and founded upon the thinnest of research. If I were you, I would not cite this in any authoritative undertaking. It is my hope that it simply encourages a thoughtful consideration of the need to change the dynamic of the conversation and possibly open the door to a more objectively sensible path forward.

If we are to continue the upward momentum of improvement in the human condition that is so readily apparent in the statistics, we must find a way to dialogue with respect and objectivity – including in the realm of policing.