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“The System Was Never Made for Us”: Understanding the impact of police brutality on Black sexually minoritized men

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Abstract

Young Black gay, bisexual, and other sexually minoritized men (SMM) face high levels of police brutality and other negative, unwarranted encounters with the police. Such interactions have known health consequences. The purpose of this study was to understand the health, mental health, and social consequences of police brutality experienced by young Black SMM. We conducted in-depth interviews with 31 Black, cisgender men, ages of 16–30 and analyzed the data using thematic analysis. Our primary results are summarized in four themes: 1) Police brutality is built into the system and diminishes trust; 2) Videos and social media make visible violence that has long existed; 3) Police brutality contributes to anxiety and other psychosocial effects; and 4) Violence reduces feelings of safety and contributes to avoidance of police. Our results highlight the direct and vicarious police brutality participants are subjected to and sheds light on the effects of such violence on trust, perceived safety, anxiety, and trauma symptoms. Results from this study contribute to the needed public health conversation around police brutality against Black men, specifically shedding light on the experiences of Black SMM.

Keywords

Black gay and bisexual men; police violence; mental health; police brutality; trauma

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Police brutality, or the broad spectrum of physical, psychological, and legal abuse of authority exacerbated and perpetuated by police (Freeman, 1996), is one of the leading causes of death for Black men and boys in the United States (US; Edwards et al., 2019). Since 2015, *The Washington Post* has been monitoring fatal police shootings in its Fatal Force database (“Police shootings database 2015–2023,” 2015) following the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Data indicate that the number of fatal police shootings has risen every year since 2017; 2022 saw the highest number of people killed by police shootings on record (1,096; “Police shootings database 2015–2023,” 2015). Approximately 20% of victims of fatal police shootings were Black (despite accounting for just 13% of the US population), and nearly all (95%) of these victims were male. Black people are 2.9 times more likely to be killed by police than white people in the US (Mapping Police Violence, 2023). Further, more than half were between the ages of 20 and 40, highlighting the particular crisis of police killings of young Black men (“Police shootings database 2015–2023,” 2015). The disproportionate burden of policing in Black communities is well documented; predominantly Black communities experience a higher burden of policing, arrests, and violent interactions with police than other communities (Brewer et al., 2014a; Lim et al., 2011). Black individuals, particularly Black men, face higher rates of surveillance, searches, arrests, charges, and longer sentences compared to white individuals (Bowleg et al., 2020; Knox et al., 2020; Kutateladze et al., 2014). Research has shown that police officers often perceive Black boys and men as “hypermasculine” (McGinley, 2015) and aggressive (Gilmore and Bettis, 2021), which can contribute to more violent interactions and increased surveillance in predominantly Black neighborhoods (McGinley, 2015). Lifetime prevalence of police violence among Black individuals is nearly 18% for physical violence, 31% for psychological violence, and 29% for neglect (DeVylder et al., 2018). In Chicago, where the current study takes place, the incident rate of fatal police violence is over 6 times higher for Black individuals, as compared to white, representing one of the greatest Black-white disparities in fatal police violence in the country (Schwartz and Jahn, 2020).

Police violence, and its effects on Black individuals and communities, can be understood through Critical Race Theory (CRT), which makes explicit the embeddedness of racism in American society. One of the primary tenets of CRT is that racism is structural in nature, built into the systems, institutions, and structures of society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Related, a distinguishing feature of CRT is the acknowledgement that racism is an ordinary, everyday experience for many Black Americans in the United States (Lynn and Dixson, 2013). Accordingly, applying CRT to police brutality recognizes that police violence against Black people stems from a long history of racialized violence perpetrated by law enforcement in an effort to maintain legal, social, political and economic oppression of Black people (Crenshaw and Gotanda, 1995; Delgado and Stefancic, 2012; Graham et al., 2011). Furthermore, police brutality is best understood as embedded in political, social, and historical forces, often showing up in routine ways, rather than the result of a few “bad apples” who occasionally commit overtly egregious acts of violence. We use CRT to guide our understanding of police brutality and identify opportunities for intervention.

While public health scholars have worked to draw attention to the public health crisis of police violence and document the underlying role of racism, much of this work has

overlooked policing of Black sexually minoritized individuals. Black gay, bisexual, queer, and other sexually minoritized men (SMM) face high rates of policing, incarceration, and criminal justice involvement (Brewer et al., 2014a; Schneider et al., 2017). Sexually minoritized individuals face high levels of sexuality-based discrimination and harassment by police. One study from 2014 found that 73% of sexually minoritized individuals living with HIV had face-to-face contact with police in the past five years; 21% of those individuals reported hostile attitudes from police (Mallory et al., 2014). Further, in examining police discrimination and harassment against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) individuals, researchers found that racial and ethnically minoritized LGBTQ people reported consistently higher rates of police abuse, neglect, and misconduct than white, non-Hispanic LGBTQ people (Mallory et al., 2014). Finally, research also indicates that annual incarceration rates for Black SMM may be as high as 31% (Brewer et al., 2014b). Incarceration can be a particularly violent experience for Black SMM, as they face a higher likelihood of sexual victimization from staff and other inmates while in prison, compared to heterosexual individuals (Beck et al., 2013).

Research suggests that negative police interactions have numerous direct and indirect health consequences. Police violence is associated with increased odds of stroke among Black men, (Talbert, 2022) and increased odds of psychotic experiences, suicidal ideation, and attempts (DeVylder et al., 2018). Traumatic traffic stops by police are associated with high levels of psychological distress (Smith et al., 2019). Police killings are also associated with higher rates of suicide among Black Americans (Kyriopoulos et al., 2022). Researchers have found that in months where there is at least one police killing of a Black person, there are significantly more suicides among Black Americans within the Census Division the killing took place (Kyriopoulos et al., 2022). Among Black SMM, police violence also has demonstrated effects on HIV risk and prevention (Quinn et al., 2021). In one study of Black SMM, 43% had experienced police discrimination in the prior year (English et al., 2020), which was negatively associated with willingness to use HIV pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP; English et al., 2020).

This summarized research notwithstanding, there remains a dearth of research on police brutality experienced by Black SMM (Quinn et al., 2021). Racist policing practices can increase community-level HIV vulnerability (Parker et al., 2018), as anti-Black racism may directly and indirectly influence sexual risk behaviors (Bowleg et al., 2013; Fields et al., 2013). For example, Black SMM report high rates of being stopped and questioned by police, which may increase vulnerability to HIV and poor HIV care outcomes (Parker et al., 2018). In light of the publicization of continued police violence against Black men and the public health consequences associated with witnessing and experiencing that violence, there remains an urgent need to examine the effects of this violence among young Black SMM living with HIV.

The current study examines the health, mental health, and social consequences of police brutality experienced by Black SMM. We use the term *police brutality* to encompass the broad spectrum of physical, psychological, and legal abuse of authority exacerbated and perpetuated by police (Freeman, 1996). This definition of police brutality includes experiencing physical violence, anti-Black racism and discrimination, neglect, aggression, or

hostility by police officers. We also sought to illuminate vicarious violence; that is, exposure to police violence via witnessing or hearing about police violence toward other Black men. This broad focus reflects the expansive interactions Black boys and men have with police to provide a more comprehensive view of Black SMM's encounters with police.

Methods

In-depth interview data were used to understand the experiences and effects of various forms of violence (police violence, community violence, intimate partner violence (IPV), etc.) on the life experiences of young Black men living with HIV in Chicago, Illinois. Individuals were eligible to participate if they met the following criteria: 1) self-identification as a Black sexually minoritized cisgender man; 2) being between 16 and 30 years-old; 3) living with HIV for three months or longer; 4) reported one or more experiences of violence in their lifetime (including witnessing or being a victim of community violence, police violence, childhood physical or sexual abuse, or intimate partner violence); and 5) residing in Chicago. The population of focus reflects the HIV epidemic in Chicago, which disproportionately impacts young Black SMM.

Interview data analyzed here were collected between October 2020 and December 2021 with 31 young Black SMM. This research was rooted in a phenomenological philosophical perspective, intended to capture young Black SMM's experiences with violence throughout their lives and understand the consequences of such violence. A phenomenological perspective aims to interpret how individuals perceive, describe, remember, and make sense of a shared, often everyday experience (in this case, violence; Patton, 2015).

The interview guide was developed based on our team's prior research on various forms of violence experienced by Black men (Hotton et al., 2019; Quinn et al., 2016, 2021), and a literature review to identify salient topics related to violence experienced by Black SMM (Anderson et al., 2018; English et al., 2018; Smith Lee and Robinson, 2019; Williams et al., 2015). The interview guide covered early childhood and family life; family, social, and romantic relationships across their lives; HIV prevention and care experiences; and experiences with various forms of violence. Our goal in this approach was to amplify the voices of Black SMM and their contributions to the scientific discourse in the field and allow men to control the narrative around their experiences with police brutality. As such, our interview questions tended to be broad, supplemented with probing questions as needed, and we allowed individuals to discuss the experiences of violence most relevant in their lives.

We used purposeful sampling strategies to recruit individuals through HIV clinics and LGBTQ service organizations, distribution of flyers on social media platforms (e.g., Instagram, Facebook), and referrals from other study participants. Interested participants were screened for eligibility. Eligible individuals completed an interview via Zoom with research associates trained in qualitative interviewing. Prior to the interview, participants completed the informed consent process; we received a waiver of parental consent for individuals under the age of 18. To minimize participation barriers, we used an altered informed consent process that provided individuals with a detailed yet plainly written letter explaining the study purpose, risks, and benefits and did not require participant signatures.

Individuals reviewed the study details with the study team and provided verbal consent to participate. Participants received a \$50 gift card and a \$10 bonus for the successful referral of other participants. Recruitment continued until we achieved meaning saturation (Hennink et al., 2017) around general life course experiences of violence and the effects of violence in their lives. Specifically, our team continuously examined and discussed our data related to how participants described the direct and indirect effects of violence in their lives. We coupled this approach with information power (Malterud et al., 2016) to assess the richness of our data in relation to our research questions. When we noticed repeating patterns and experiences and were able to begin to answer our primary research questions, we ceased enrollment.

The semi-structured format of the interview provided flexibility and allowed interviewers to follow participants' lead in the discussion. It is important to note that there were no specific questions that asked whether participants perceived events to be attributable to their race, HIV status, or sexual identity. This approach was intentional, as prior research has established that social categories such as race, sexual identity, and gender are interdependent and the social systems that enforce them are mutually reinforcing. As such, it is often difficult, if not impossible, for individuals to tease apart what aspect of their identity was the cause of violence or discrimination (Bowleg, 2013; Quinn et al., 2022; Turan et al., 2019). Study protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Medical College of Wisconsin.

We used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2022) to rigorously analyze our data and examine patterns related to police brutality. Developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2022), reflexive thematic analysis is an approach to qualitative data analysis that allows for inductive analysis that can capture both semantic and latent meaning in the data and offer both descriptive and interpretive accounts of the data. Semantic analysis examines surface-level meaning, focusing on themes that are readily and explicitly identified (e.g., experiences of police violence). In contrast, latent analysis refers to the underlying, covert, and often implicit meaning in the data (e.g., presentations of masculinity; Braun and Clarke, 2022). Reflexive thematic analysis includes six phases: familiarization, coding, generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes, refining, defining, and naming themes, and writing up (Braun and Clarke, 2022). We detail this process below to document our team's approach to thematic analysis (i.e., our 'audit trail' (Nowell et al., 2017)), as rigorous, well-documented thematic analysis can increase trustworthiness of our data and analysis (Nowell et al., 2017; Roberts et al., 2019).

Interviews were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy. Next, transcripts were uploaded into MAXQDA qualitative analysis software. We used a team-based approach (Corbin and Strauss, 2015) to data familiarization and coding. Five members of the research team began by independently reading selected transcripts to familiarize themselves with the data. During this process team members used memoing to capture personal reactions to the data and analytic insights, and began to develop a list of candidate codes and categories (Saldana, 2016). We met as a team to discuss our reactions to the data, analytic insights, and code labels. We then created a single codebook that included both inductive codes identified from the interviews and codes identified a priori based on

our literature reviews of violence and HIV among Black SMM (Anderson et al., 2018; English et al., 2018; Smith Lee and Robinson, 2019; Williams et al., 2015). We employed multiple rounds of coding to refine and narrow our codebook, develop code definitions and parameters, and identify any duplicative or overlapping codes. We continued this process of meeting as a team to discuss and refine the codes and returning to the data to apply the codes until all members reached consensus on the finalized codes, code definitions, and code inclusion and exclusion criteria.

We then began coding our data. In the first round of coding, transcripts were coded with participant demographic data, including age, length of time living with HIV, and sexual identity. In the second round of coding, we applied the codebook to all interviews and used analytic memos to capture semantic and latent concepts in the data, preliminary categories and themes, and reflections and questions about the data. All data were coded twice, by separate team members, to enhance coding reliability. As part of our coding process, we began to develop candidate themes based on the primary research questions. Reflexive thematic analysis calls for repeated movement between coding and analysis to develop robust interpretation and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). As such, we continued to use memoing and regular team meetings to refine our analyses. Our final themes were developed through an iterative process of engagement with the full data corpus, refining candidate themes, and focusing on the primary research question: How has police brutality affected young Black SMM? Our analysis process continued throughout the writing process as we engaged in additional memoing, team discussions, reading of the literature, and reading of our data.

Importantly, we acknowledge that researchers' roles are central in qualitative analysis and that our approach, construction of themes, and understanding of police violence is constituted based on our team's experiences, identities, and presuppositions. Reflexive TA required reflection on our assumptions and expectations throughout the analysis process. Specifically, we used memoing and bracketing techniques (Braun and Clarke, 2022; Miles et al., 2013) throughout coding and analysis to interrogate our development of themes and acknowledge and push back on our assumptions. We also offer additional details on our team: Our research team consisted of a diverse group of academic and community-based scholars who identify as Black, Asian, and White. Some individuals identify as gay or same-gender-loving, while others identify as heterosexual. Team members bring expertise in public health, clinical social work, policing and other state-sanctioned violence, HIV prevention and treatment, and health disparities affecting Black and LGBTQ+ communities. Some members of our team have navigated the social realities of racism and police and community violence in their own lives. Importantly, this work was led by a PI with expertise in racism and the impacts of police and community violence on health outcomes among minoritized populations.

Results

This study examined perceptions of and experiences with police among a sample of 31 young Black SMM living with HIV in Chicago. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 1. Through our analysis process, we identified four themes that reflect young Black

SMM's experiences of police violence: 1) Police brutality is built into the system and diminishes trust in policing; 2) Videos and social media make visible violence that has long existed; 3) Police brutality contributes to anxiety and other psychosocial effects; and 4) Violence reduces feelings of safety and contributes to avoidance of police. These themes are explained below. Pseudonyms are used in our presentation of data; participants were given an opportunity to pick their pseudonym or, if preferred, allow the study team to assign a pseudonym.

Police brutality toward Black men is built into the system of policing

Racism, both interpersonal and structural, played a central role in how these Black SMM discussed their treatment by the police. In discussing their interactions with police, participants in this study often described how police brutality was structural in nature, pointing to the anti-Black origins of policing as context to their contemporary experiences and views. Toward the end of his interview, one participant was asked if he believed racist policing practices could change in his lifetime. He stated:

There are some very shady police officers in Chicago and a lot of people won't ever experience what a Black man would have to go through, what a Black man experiences with police in Chicago, you know? The whole general idea of the police was to capture slaves. That's where police came from, to capture Black men and bring them back to their owners. That's where the police came from, so the police are just continuing to do that. So, until the police are over, then there's no change in my mind that could come...the police were put her to detain Black men and that's what it's continued to do.

– Reggie, age 30

In recalling the ways in which anti-Blackness is rooted in the history of policing, participants situated police brutality against Black men as a form of structural anti-Black racism. That is, they recognized that the system of policing was built “to detain Black men” and despite the reality of “bad apples” and “shady” police officers, the crux of the issue was structural. As the young man quoted above noted, the system of policing needed to be abolished in order for real change to occur.

Other participants' narratives were similar: police were not there to protect or serve Black people or communities. In discussing policing, one participant explained his newfound apathy toward the police after years of getting angry over police injustice. He stated:

I feel like you can't have an attitude toward something that was never meant for us. You understand what I'm saying? I just feel like that the system was never made for us. And it's going to eventually, sooner or later, happen to all African Americans because that one mildly traumatic experience or encounter with the police and the brutality, myself, multiple times, have I experienced this. The system was made for Caucasians and to protect their property. So, when it comes to police brutality, it's not going to end. So, to me, it's not surprising anymore. Yeah, it hurts, but it's not surprising because this is something that's been going on for years upon years. And we've been fighting for change, and nothing has changed. I can't let it keep getting me under and my feelings when it's not going to change.

-Maxwell, age 30

Several other participants similarly suggested that at a certain point, fighting against “the system” was futile and highlighting the racism embedded in policing systems. They expressed exhaustion and the need to step away from “the fight” as an act of self-care and protection. Many participants expressed a lack of hope that the system and policing toward Black men and their communities would ever change. As illustrated in the quote above, given this outlook, they were resigned to accept things as they currently were.

Participants were directly asked about their personal experiences with police officers in Chicago. Participants talked about the power imbalance between police and residents, particularly for Black men, and how this was fundamental to their interactions with police and inability to speak up, defend themselves, or protect themselves.

When police are talking to people – you know how like, sometimes how bullies talk to their prey? Like, “oh, you’re never going to be anything.” That’s how the police talked to us. That’s how police talk to people that I’ve seen and that I’ve witnessed. So, like, “You’re dumb. You’re slow. You’re broke. You’re in the wrong. I’m in the right because I’m a police officer.”

– Jordan, age 29

Participants described both witnessing verbal harassment and physical violence of Black people and direct victimization by police. In addition to verbal altercations, participants described being “roughed up” by police, particularly during interactions where the participant was innocent of any wrongdoing. Several described instances in which they were assumed to be guilty, relentlessly interrogated, belittled, and degraded before being let go. This was evident in one participant’s account of being pulled over on New Year’s Eve.

We got pulled over on New Year’s, and the police that we got pulled over by were just assholes. They pull up in unmarked cars, and they always ran like six deep or whatnot. They pulled us over, and it was only me and my two friends, all of us we went to college and whatnot. All of us we’re not really out here riding around with guns or anything like that, but they were being assholes. They were constantly asking us, “Do you guys have any warrants? Are any of you guys on probation?” They’re constantly asking, trying to press it, to try to get a reason to get in the car. So, my friend started to talk back a little bit, and so they pulled us out of the car and they roughed us up a little bit, because that’s what Chicago police officers do. They talk a little shit to you, rough you up. They patted us down and stuff like that, and then they just gave us a ticket and let us go. But when they roughed us up, my friend, he had scratches all over his arm. Me, I was just shocked, because the whole George Floyd situation and stuff had just happened.

– Kenny, age 23

These interactions were commonly reported among participants. The young Black SMM in this study described frequent over-policing, wherein their encounters with police were with three or more squad cars and numerous police officers on scene, often prior to any real incident or altercation. The mere presence of police officers in such force heightened tension and contributed to increased stress and defensiveness. Further, participants described verbal

abuse from police that was intended to elicit a response from men that would give the police an excuse to search their cars, “rough you up,” or use physical aggression and violence. As a result of these experiences, many individuals described trying to steer clear of the police to avoid potentially confrontational or deadly interactions.

Yeah. I don't bother police, and police don't bother me, I guess. Well, the last incident they did. I was drunk because it was my best friend's grandma's funeral, and I was pissing in the alley, and they just came up on me talking shit, and I don't know. I know I was talking shit, and they just hit me in the mouth with the butt of the gun. Got a chipped tooth, and my nose was a little broke. I never went to the hospital to get my nose fixed, though. They just beat my ass and threw me in front of University of Chicago Hospital, and I just stumbled in there, and they put me in a drunk tank. This was two years ago.

– Christian, age 30

As this participant explained, young Black men wanted to believe that if they didn't “bother police” then they would be safe from police brutality. Yet, this participant then immediately recounted an experience of unprovoked verbal harassment and subsequent physical violence.

These unwarranted interactions with police were among the most frustrating for these young Black SMM, who were justifiably angry about racist profiling and targeted harassment. One participant explained, “I was guilty by just my look, or association with somebody else that might have been doing something that they were trying to capture, and I would just be roughed up” (Reggie, age 30). Another participant described an experience of racist profiling and the first time he was assaulted by the police.

I never liked to taking the main street, so I always would cut through alleys and stuff. I still do it, still now, because I don't like taking main streets. I don't like being seen for some reason. And they thought I had a gun. And I was 17 at the time. This was around the time I first witnessed a gun too. And I don't like guns. And they thought I had a gun. And instead of them bopping in, searching me a good way or whatever, they tackled me, shoved my face in the ground, broke my glasses, said I had a gun, said I threw a gun back in the alley. I'm, “Wait. What? I'm coming from the store trying to make it to my friend house with our snacks.” He put his knee in my neck, broke my glasses, all this stupid stuff...I rather not deal with them. I feel like no matter what, they think I'm the bad guy. I did something wrong and I'm guilty until proven innocent.

– James, age 23

The exasperation this individual expressed of always being perceived as “the bad guy” and “guilty until proven innocent” created significant stress for several participants. They described such experiences as exhausting, angering, and stressful. Another participant, after being asked about his experiences with police, recounted the following:

Violence, when it comes to police, has not really presented itself physically. But I have experienced being profiled, like, very, very violent....We were outside of a convenience store, and I was waiting for my friends to come out of the store. Chicago PD, they pull up and they were like, “What's in your bag?” and I'm like,

“It’s food. I just came from the grocery store.” And for some strange reason they didn’t believe me at all...I got really fed up and I just threw my stuff on the floor. There it is...and it’s just snacks...I was definitely anxious because it just didn’t feel right. It didn’t feel like they really had a reason to be messing with me. And I was a minor at the time. When I went home, it did make me a little depressed and a little sad. Wow, it could’ve easily went left if they thought I had drugs or a weapon or a toy gun or something.

-Leon, age 23

These experiences of racist profiling, targeted harassment, and assumptions of guilt reported by the participants reflect the structural anti-Black racism and ordinariness of racism experienced by these Black SMM in Chicago. As participants explained, modern policing is rooted in slavery and was established to control Black people. As such, the racism and violence evident in participants’ current interactions with police are embedded into the larger system of policing.

Police brutality diminishes trust in policing—Participants described the ways in which police mistreatment diminished trust in policing. Mistrust stemmed from violent and degrading personal experiences with police, as well as from witnessing police violence against other Black men. As one individual stated, “It makes me just watch my surroundings around police, kinda not really wanna trust them.” Participants described “the system” and skepticism around the extent to which police would, or could, help them.

I’ve seen from case to case to case how this white – excuse my language – this Caucasian woman that got killed (Justine Damond) got more news credit than Breonna Taylor. And her officers were arrested and everything. But yet, here it is. This little Black girl who’s laying on her bed asleep. But then here it is. You bring up her past history. But you haven’t brought up her [Justine Damond’s] past history. You know? So, it puts a damper on me trusting the system. But like I said, I have family members that are officers too. So, I know that there are a lot of good ones out there. But you have those ones that stick to the code of, “My fellow officer comes first before anybody.”

– Oden, age 30

Here, Oden makes reference to the 2017 police killing of Justine Damond in Minneapolis. Damond called 9-1-1 to report a sexual assault and was killed by a Black police officer. Around the time of this interview (2021), the officer involved had been convicted of third-degree murder, although this was eventually overturned (The Associated Press, 2021). As data provided in subsequent sections will show, several individuals referenced other cases and situations to provide evidence of the inequitable treatment of Black and white Americans by police, and described how those inequities influenced trust of “the system,” as Oden explained.

In discussing police brutality, participants also described the trauma associated with the inactions of police, which further exacerbated mistrust. Young Black SMM in this study

explained how the police had failed to play a protective role in the lives of Black men and boys and Black communities.

One participant had been discussing experiencing multiple instances of police brutality in his life, including physical assault, harassment, and racist profiling and accusations of wrongdoing. He then referred to another “injustice” in his life that made him no longer trust the police. When asked to describe that experience he recounted an abusive relationship his mom was in when he was a young child, and the lack of protection provided by the police.

Every time they [Police] were called in that situation and every time it would turn into the police literally were just there to stop it, and not really stop it if you get what I’m saying. They stopped it from immediately happening, however it was not to stop an ongoing situation. Like, “Arrest this man. Put him in jail. Lock him up. Throw away the dang key.” That was never the situation. So, that was just yet another moment where I was able to stand more firm into my beliefs of, “Don’t trust Chicago police because they don’t really help.” They never helped any situation where they’re supposed to.

-Shawn, age 24

The participant quoted above later went on to say: “I have the mindset of, the police will be probably the last people I call in any situation. I just don’t trust them.” This “overpolicing-underpolicing paradox” (Rios, 2011) reflects how young Black men can be both targeted and overly surveilled by police, and yet also neglected in times of need and protection. This combination of over and underpolicing can contribute to and exacerbate mistrust of the police and criminal justice system (Luhur et al., 2021).

Videos and social media make visible the rampant police violence that has “always been there”

These interviews took place in the year following the murder of George Floyd. Not surprisingly, George Floyd and videos of police brutality against Black men were frequent topics during the interviews. Several participants pointed out that “It’s always been there. It’s just now, it’s being recorded. See, that’s the difference. It’s been always there.” (RJ, age 29) The reactions to increasing video footage of police brutality were mixed. On the one hand, some participants experienced vicarious trauma from exposure to these videos, which contributed to significant anxiety, fear, and distress. Seeing footage of Black men being killed or injured by police officers over and over again caused a trauma response for many individuals. One individual explained that the videos confirmed the fears he had of the police: “It just made me feel like I was right for being scared of the police, being nervous of the police” (James, age 23). The videos were shared widely on social media and it was difficult, if not impossible, for participants to avoid seeing or hearing the details about such events. One individual was asked how seeing the videos of police violence affected him. He stated:

When all this stuff happened with George Floyd, it would just come up in my dreams. It was just very different than all the times before. And there’s so much content showing what’s happening. I’m on Twitter, I see all those things...I do

think it affected me, I think it made me mad. It definitely affected me mentally because it affected how I slept and the things that I dreamed about.

– John, age 25

Yet, simultaneously, young Black SMM were also grateful to finally have evidence of such violence that could be used to at least try to hold police officers accountable for their actions. They were glad that these videos were shedding light on the violence they had long been aware of and experienced.

Yeah, I'm glad that the country's seeing it. It's Chicago. It's a lot of people that I know that have been killed by police. I've been attacked by police myself. So, I'm just glad it's been getting some light to this shit that's been going on...I gotta remember what my dad told me. "You're always gonna have a target on your back being a Black man in America." I don't know. That's kind of sad. It's kind of fucked up. So, I learned, and I'm glad I did have my father to raise me to not be that way in the streets or whatever, but I have been in the streets, but I know how to move around, I guess.

– Christian, age 30

Young Black SMM reported varied levels of engagement in advocacy and social justice efforts related to police violence and racial injustice throughout the summer of 2020. For some participants, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement provided an opportunity to feel heard and take action against a long-standing injustice. When reflecting on his involvement in BLM protests and events, one individual stated:

It just made me feel like I have more of a voice, and not just as a Black person, but a living person. And it shows that people do care, it shows that not every white person is racist, and it shows there are people that do want a change.

– Kenny, age 23

Another participant was less optimistic about change. He drew a comparison between the police response to protests in support of Black people (e.g., Black Lives Matter) with the insurrection at the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, led by predominantly white men:

I felt like even though we're out there protesting, I feel like some things will be done, but some really don't care. It just proves from what just recently happened. We can go out there and they can use all that brutal force on us, but they didn't have none of that for the people that just stormed the Capitol. So, it shows you that they'll kill us easily with no hesitation."

– Michael, age 29

This excerpt highlights the disparities in the way protests that promote racial justice are policed compared to those with predominantly white protesters, such as those at the US Capitol.

Police brutality contributes to anxiety and other mental health effects

Participants reported that police encounters negatively affected their mental health. They described anxiety, paranoia, PTSD symptoms, and depression following negative encounters

with police. One participant described his reaction to getting pulled over by police: *“I get a little jittery when it comes down to seeing the blue lights behind me because I’m nervous. And I may look calm on the outside, but in my inside, my head will be like, “Oh, my effing God.”* Participants described similar effects from vicarious violence, or hearing about and witnessing police violence toward other Black men. One participant, when asked directly how video footage of police violence affected his mental health, described not only the anxiety he experienced, but the physical manifestations of that anxiety.

It’s a very bad anxiety, because you don’t know whether you can go to the store and buy Arizona (iced tea), some Skittles, and walk down the street with a hood on. You don’t know if you can walk around your neighborhood with all black on. Black clothes, black hoodie, black pants, black shoes, without getting accused of doing a robbery. Yes, I have anxiety every time I leave out the house. I cannot leave out the house without my phone because you never know when something’s going to happen. And I need to have my phone ready to record just in case. I have to walk down the street with my phone in my hand, on the camera button, just in case something happens. You know what I’m saying? Because you never know. When you see the police, your heart started racing, you get a headache, you get dizzy, because you never know what’s going to happen. They’re looking at you crazy, you’re worried. No matter what you do, you’re going to feel like that you’re going to be targeted.

-Roger, age 30

Here, Roger’s references to buying Arizona tea and skittles from the store and walking while wearing a hood up, are references to Trayvone Martin, who was killed wearing a hooded sweatshirt while walking home from a convenience store, where he purchased skittles and a can of Arizona iced tea (Botelho, 2012). Others described similar anxieties:

It definitely does affect my mental health, because it’s my ethnicity at the end of the day...I feel like anxiety is more of a problem than depression is to be honest, because anxiety can lead to anger, irritation, and depression. So, I feel like it starts off with anxiety first, and I never want to fear for my life or out in public. But sometimes you have to do whatever means necessary, especially if you’re a color to avoid them. And it’s not it’s not about me being – it’s not about it being stereotypical, it’s just the fact that you don’t want to, you don’t want those problems occurring. You have bad expectations for that stuff.

– Tyrell, age 24

In a different interview, one participant had just finished talking about police violence. He was then asked how he thought such violence might influence the HIV care of Black men. He responded, *“I think it’s [police violence] going to affect anybody that’s Black”* and went on to describe the potential effects of police violence on all Black people.

I never contemplated suicide, but I know people do that. I don’t wanna give up. Even though it’s like something after something after something. We’ve seen somebody getting killed and every time you look up, it’s somebody. It’s always a new case of a police, another Black person. And there’s no justice, whether it be a

murder or a serial murderer and they don't get shot or killed, honey, and they go to Burger King and then go to jail.

-Michael, age 29

As this individual explained, the anxiety and hopelessness that some Black men experienced was influenced by the relentlessness of police violence toward Black people and inequities in the way white and Black people are treated by police. This participant mentioned going "to Burger King and then go to jail," in reference to Dylann Roof, a 21-year-old white man and self-proclaimed white supremacist (Sanchez and O'Shea, 2016) who, in 2015, murdered nine individuals at a Bible study session at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, NC. Reports indicate that after his arrest, police bought him fast food from Burger King (Sanchez and O'Shea, 2016). Instances like these were cited to highlight the stark differences in the way white and Black men are treated by police.

Violence reduced feelings of safety and contributed to avoidance of police

In response to police violence, some young Black SMM in this study modified their behaviors in an attempt to avoid the police or potentially being in the wrong place at the wrong time. They felt targeted and unsafe and worked to avoid the police as much as possible.

I really went out of my way as a child and a minor in general to just avoid police contact and not give them a reason to hurt me or try to hurt me. I've never been put into a position where I felt like I had to defend myself from the police or that they were about to kill me or anything. It's just mostly been like with the police a lack of care, a lack of empathy from them.

-Leon, age 23

As the individual quoted above explained, efforts to avoid the police began in childhood, which was often taught (implicitly or explicitly) by Black communities and families who were aware of the risks involved in police interactions. For some, this was amplified by their sexuality. Not surprisingly, nearly all the participants described efforts to avoid the police. Some described limiting their social interactions, modifying driving routes, and attempting to avoid spaces where there might be violence or police intervention.

I did my partying and things when I was younger. I would still like to go to parties. I would still like to go to the social gathering, but I haven't did that in years, just for this whole sake of, if I don't put myself in that position, can't nothing happen to me.

- Eric, age 29

When asked what he meant by "if I don't put myself in that position," he explained:

It's on the outside, period. Someone like – the George Floyd incident, specifically. He was outside. Not saying that he was wrong for being outside or anything. He has the right to do all of that. Me personally, I can't see myself hanging out with a group of friends, just standing outside, because I know, 1) what that look like, 2), what the police see it as, and 3), what could possibly be an outcome. I just

personally wouldn't put myself in that position. If you guys want to hang out, we can do that inside one of our homes, what's wrong with that?

– Eric, age 29

This individual explained how even just being outdoors with friends makes him a target of police violence given how he may be perceived by police. The participants were acutely aware that they were viewed through a lens that viewed Black men as dangerous and criminal, putting them at risk of police confrontations and violence. One individual was discussing his anxieties leaving the house noting, “I don't wanna go out that much because of everything and the PTSD. I'm not gon' lie to you.” He went on to say he “felt scared of being around white people sometimes” and was “paranoid” something might happen.

Interviewer Are you worried about people calling the police on you?

Participant Yeah. When I go around in more predominant white neighborhoods, I feel like I play the part. I'll be polite and might be real extra friendly, and I try to make sure that I'm not like scary to people, if you get what I'm saying... It has affected me somewhat because when I went in some of those neighborhoods, I've made a lot of good friends with people. So, I know that it's good people out there, but I also had bad experiences. So, I know it's like half and half, so I don't know. Like I said, it's like Russian roulette. You don't know what you're going to get. – Michael, age 29

Michael's description of having to “play the part” was echoed by other individuals who described code switching to improve their safety and reduce the risk of police interactions and violence. For some, this was amplified by their sexuality. One individual described it this way:

It's like the police is always after you without the police being after you, if you know what I mean. It's like, all of a sudden, you look over your shoulder and you're like, ‘Am I being too gay or am I going to make somebody uncomfortable or make them feel like I want them or desire them?’ But nobody ever calls it out. It's just like something you've got to be on your tippy toes about because you don't want to make the wrong person feel like you actually feeling them.

– Lee, age 24

Discussion

Police brutality against Black individuals in the US remains a significant public health crisis with numerous health, mental health, and community-wide consequences (DeVylder et al., 2018). Consistent with CRT (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010), results from this study center the experiences of young Black gay, bisexual, and other SMM by privileging their perspectives to highlight how their encounters with and perceptions of police influence and their mental health and sense of safety. As one participant, Michael so aptly explained, “Every time you look up, it's somebody. It's always a new case of a police, another Black person. And there's no justice.”

The young Black SMM in this study detailed a range of highly problematic police encounters, witnessed and experienced, and the psychosocial consequences of such experiences. Participants spoke not only of physical violence, but the relentless, non-physical forms of police brutality that they were subjected to on a daily basis. These experiences—racist profiling, hyperpolicing, assumptions of guilt or wrongdoing, and targeted harassment—were frequent, and clearly affected young men’s wellbeing and feelings of safety. Through the lens of CRT, such experiences demonstrate the “ordinariness” of racism (Crenshaw and Gotanda, 1995; Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010), or the ways that racism becomes embedded into society and plays out in routine experiences. Ordinarity, however, does not diminish their impact. As demonstrated here, routine, hostile encounters with police can contribute to symptoms of depression and anxiety and can contribute to fear and mistrust of law enforcement. The anticipatory stress associated with policing resulted in concerted efforts to avoid the police, including avoiding social gatherings or parties that could draw the attention of the police or modifying behaviors to avoid anything that might be construed as “threatening” to others and subsequently put them at risk for police contact. The anticipation of police brutality can contribute to police avoidance strategies and is a significant stressor associated with poor mental health outcomes among Black people (Alang et al., 2021a). Research by Bowleg and colleagues (2020) found that police avoidance mediates the pathway between incarceration history and depression for Black men, such that men with a history of incarceration reported greater police avoidance, and subsequently, higher depressive symptoms (Bowleg et al., 2020). Furthermore, police interactions can also contribute to avoidance of other systems, including health systems, serving as a potential driver of health disparities (Carbonaro, 2022).

Study participants discussed both individual and collective trauma as a result of the significant enduring harm police have caused Black communities. Collective trauma results from current and historical racial violence at the community level and can manifest in the body and influence individual behavior with detrimental effects (Heberle et al., 2020; Silver et al., 2021). As evident in this study, individuals need not be personally victimized to be impacted by police violence. Participants discussed how seeing videos and images of police violence toward Black people contributed to fear, hyperalertness, and anxiety, which is supported by prior research (Hawkins, 2022). A recent study with Black adults found evidence that viewing photos of police violence toward Black people was associated with increased sympathetic reactivity and negative affect. Further, greater levels of racial centrality, or the degree to which individuals define themselves with regard to their race (Sosoo et al., 2022), exacerbated the association between vicarious police violence and negative affect (Sosoo et al., 2022). This is critical, as discussions around the mental health effects of violence primarily focus on immediate victims and in-person witnesses, rather than the substantial effects of witnessing regular and everyday police brutality.

As study participants explained, cellphone footage has put a national spotlight on longstanding practices of police brutality. Exposure to videos of police brutality have the potential to exacerbate the race-based trauma and harm to which Black individuals are routinely exposed. Unprecedented exposure to videos of police brutality, coupled with anger over the lack of justice and accountability, can be significant sources of individual racial stress (García and Sharif, 2015), elevate population-level distress (Geller et al., 2014),

and contribute to poor health outcomes (Duru et al., 2012; Geronimus et al., 2006). This also sheds light on ethical challenges confronting media outlets when considering how to sensitively handle video footage of police brutality. For example, social media platforms need mechanisms in place that protect individuals from autoplays of violent content while scrolling. Content warnings from news outlets should also be explicit, such that individuals are made aware that the footage may be disturbing and difficult to watch. Such efforts may help reduce inadvertent exposure to violent content and limit the trauma associated with seeing graphic videos of police brutality.

CRT is characterized by its commitment not only to understanding the impact of racism on various phenomena, but to develop strategies to address inequities (Ford and Airhihenbuwa, 2010). As such, we offer several strategies for consideration. To counteract the effects of police brutality, our study, in concert with extant literature, highlights the need for police reform to eliminate violence against Black people and provide accountability in instances of police misconduct. Transformative efforts have been underway in cities across the US to reform policing systems and shift resources from policing to community development, mental health and health care, and community-led crime prevention programs (Phelps et al., 2021; Schultz, 2021). In 2020 alone, Black-led organizations and Black activists successfully advocated for upwards of \$840 million to be reinvested from police departments into their communities and secured over \$160 million in investments for community-led efforts (Pendergrass, 2021). There have also been promising efforts to reduce police brutality using peer intervention. For example, Project ABLE (Active Bystanderism for Law Enforcement) teaches officers to intervene in and prevent their peers from perpetrating violence (Georgetown College, n.d.; Staub and Staub, 2015). Additionally, an increasing number of states that have created a duty for police officers to intervene, report, or render medical aid in cases where other officers are using excessive or illegal force or misconduct, resulting, in some cases, in criminal liability of complicit officers (Subramanian and Arzy, 2021).

The lack of accountability and transparency within policing systems diminishes trust in law enforcement (as expressed by participants in this study) and leaves victims and communities angry over a lack of accountability and justice (Advancement Project, 2017). Efforts to restore community trust in policing could benefit from civilian review boards with subpoena power and department policies that require accountability and transparency (Chapman, 2023). Additionally, the legal system in the US affords government officials qualified immunity, which provides a certain degree of legal protection to police officers acting in performance of their jobs. Qualified immunity was intended to protect government employees from frivolous lawsuits and give them “breathing room” to make mistakes (*Ashcroft v. Al-Kidd*, 2011). Yet, in practice, qualified immunity shields government officials from being held personally liable for constitutional violations (including the right to be free from excessive police force; Guidry, 2021). The doctrine has been applied in numerous cases of police brutality, operating as a shield for police officers and limiting accountability (Guidry, 2021; Sullivan, 2021). Efforts to reform or end qualified immunity may be an important step in holding police officers accountable when they use excessive force. As Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote in her critique of qualified immunity in 2018, “It tells officers that they can shoot first and think later, and it tells

the public that palpably unreasonable conduct will go unpunished.”(The Supreme Court of the United States, 2018)

Finally, as we noted in the introduction, there remains a lack of adequate reporting practices and data collection procedures on policing. There is no publicly available, accurate, federal database to track the number of people killed by police, police use of force, or aggressive policing. Data collected by the FBI includes only about one-third of fatal police shootings and obscures racial disparities in police killings (Tran et al., 2022). The Center for Policing Equity developed the National Justice Database, the nation’s first database tracking police behavior (“Center for Policing Equity - National Justice Database,” n.d.), and the *Washington Post’s* Fatal Force database (“Police shootings database 2015–2023,” 2015) has been a leader in tracking fatal police shootings since 2015. That said, continued efforts are needed to develop and enforce best practices in reporting, standardize data collection practices across all police departments, and improve transparency and public availability of data.

Our data also highlight the urgent need for mental health care interventions for young Black SMM who have been subjected to police brutality, including exposure to photos and videos of police violence toward other Black men. We acknowledge that mental health interventions will not reduce police brutality, yet they offer an important intermediary opportunity to treat the mental health of Black individuals who have been negatively impacted by police violence by improving access, availability and quality of mental health care for Black Americans. For example, efforts are needed to increase the availability of Black and Brown mental health clinicians, expand mental health care in schools, and increase access to clinicians with expertise in racial trauma and collective violence. Only one in three Black people who need mental health care receives it (Dalencour et al., 2017), and police brutality can contribute to mistrust and the avoidance of medical institutions for Black individuals who have experienced negative and unnecessary police encounters (Alang et al., 2021b).

Despite the contributions of this study, there are limitations to note. First, limited in-person activities due to COVID-19 restrictions significantly disrupted our team’s recruitment activities. For example, in partnership with several HIV care clinics, our staff were going to spend time in waiting rooms and be physically present in drop-in centers and support groups. Many non-critical gatherings were canceled or, upon resuming in-person activities, were limited to small groups or only open to essential personnel and patients. As such, we had difficulty recruiting young Black SMM living with HIV. In particular, although our study was open to 16–30 year-olds, we did not enroll any 16 or 17-year-olds for this study. Additionally, this was a study conducted with young Black SMM living with HIV, aiming to answer broader research questions about the impact of violence on HIV. While our qualitative data bring attention to the experiences of police brutality among Black SMM, this research does not address how such experiences influence health and social outcomes for Black SMM in comparison to heterosexual men. Further, continued efforts are needed to understand how various levels of exposure to police brutality may influence HIV risk and care outcomes for Black SMM.

Results from this study contribute to the needed public health conversation around police brutality against Black people, specifically shedding light on the experiences of Black SMM. Police brutality is an urgent public health crisis (American Public Health Association, 2020, 2018) with detrimental health effects (DeVylder et al., 2022). Although research in this area has expanded in recent years, we have minimal accurate data on the prevalence of various forms of police brutality, and little understanding of the mechanisms linking police brutality to poor health outcomes or the impacts of police brutality across the life course. We view this study as setting the stage for future research that can go further in identifying how police brutality impacts Black SMM and identifying and testing structural-level interventions that reduce racism and police violence and improve the health and wellbeing of Black SMM. As others have noted, however, the scientific community has not kept pace with the demands for reform and transformation and, as such, communities and police leadership are forging ahead often without the needed evidence base (Engel et al., 2020; Robinson, 2020). As such, police brutality must continue to be at the forefront of the public health research agenda.

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Highlights

- Police brutality against Black individuals in the US is a public health crisis
- Black sexually minoritized men experience high levels of police brutality
- Direct and indirect police brutality can result in anxiety and trauma symptoms
- Structural interventions are needed to reform policing and increase accountability

Table 1:**Sample Demographics**Demographics characteristics of study participants ($n = 31$)

Continuous Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Age	28	3.2
Categorical Variables		
	<i>n</i>	%
Race/ethnicity		
Black	29	94%
Multiracial (with Black as one of those races)	2	6%
Sexual identity		
Gay	23	74%
Bisexual	4	13%
Queer	2	6%
Non-conforming	1	3%
Pansexual	1	3%
Education		
Less than a high school degree/GED	1	3%
High school graduate/GED	9	29%
Some college or technical school	16	52%
College graduate	4	13%
Missing	1	3%
Viral Load (self-report)		
Undetectable	14	45%
Missed ART doses in the last week		
None	16	52%
1–2	10	32%
3–4	2	6%
5+	1	3%
Missing	1	3%

Note: Percentages represent the number of people that responded to each question. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.