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Public Safety: Disarming Police in the United States

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## Abstract

I will be discussing the armament of police in the United States. I will consider the reasons why disarmament is not a conversation in the United States. I identify that there is a problem in the United States when about 1000 people die every year due to being shot and killed by police officers. The issue of officers shooting civilians goes beyond just the general problem and is particularly an issue for communities of color and people with mental disabilities as there is a disproportionate number of deaths in both of these communities. I will also identify and discuss the policies of police in the United States and the lack of accountability of officers. I will analyze the police in other countries where they do not carry guns. Lastly, I will focus on ways of changing our current structure in a small manner so as to identify where a conversation can begin. These changes include the use of more non lethal weapons and improving officer training.

## Problem Statement

There is currently a crucial problem in America involving the excessive use of lethal weapons, specifically firearms, by the police. The police are meant to protect and serve their community and the civilians in their community. Yet, policing seems to have become reliant on guns in America. By giving police officers guns, society creates a power complex in which there is a knowledge that any police officer could kill a person at any point if he or she so chooses. It has become the status quo that officers in the United States carry guns on their belts. This status quo is not necessary- there are other options for protecting and serving that do not lead to the killings of the very civilians that are meant to be protected. The overall excessive usage of firearms is concerning within itself but especially when one considers that, in many instances, conflicts can be pacified by non-lethal weaponry. This power dynamic is ingrained through the

constant and immediate moral judgment in which police officers are viewed as the good guys and suspects as the bad, a judgement that clearly conflicts with our country's fundamental tenet of innocence until proven guilty. The prevalence of police officer shootings that lead to deaths of civilians indicate a necessity to question whether guns are necessary for the safety of civilians. Thus, my research question is: Is public safety in the United States improved by the disarmament of police officers?

### Methodology

For my methodology, I did a literature review. I planned initially on conducting interviews, but due to the pandemic I was unable to fulfill my initial goal. I used many different sources to find my data, but, unfortunately, due to a lack of academic research in this subject, I had to use more articles and non profit sites than I originally had hoped. I had to use nonprofit data in order to understand the police homicides due to the fact that, as discussed below, the source one would expect to be most reputable, the Federal Bureau of Investigation ("the FBI"), is in fact not reliable. I found that due to disarming police being considered radical, not many people have written about it. I believe that due to the country's refocusing on police brutality, there may be more data and essays soon.

### Problems with Police Having Guns

#### A. General

It is apparent when looking at quantitative research that the United States is and has been facing an overuse of lethal weapons. As of February 13, 2020, "103 people have been shot and killed by police" in the year 2020 (Police Shootings). In 2019, "1004 people [were] shot and killed by police" (Police Shootings). Despite these numbers appearing high, they are actually

rather average for the annual number of fatalities in the United States at the hands of an officer's gun: in 2018, there were 992 civilian deaths, in 2017, there were 986 civilian deaths, in 2016 there were 962 civilian deaths, in 2015 there were 994 civilian deaths (Police Shootings). This is an exorbitant number of deaths, especially when considering that this is not the total number of deaths at the hands of police officers, but solely the number of deaths caused by a police officer using a firearm. The severity of these numbers becomes apparent when one understands that in 2018 "[t]here were only 23 days [...] where police did not kill someone" (Police Shootings). It is also evident through the fact that in 2019 "police killed three people per day last year" (Higgins). The statistics are shocking and they show that "[a] third of the people killed by a stranger in this country are actually killed by a police officer" (Mckesson). These numbers are staggering, but it becomes even harder to swallow when one considers the conditions under which people died. "In 2014, police killed at least 253 unarmed people and 91 people who were stopped for mere traffic violations" (Campaign Zero). The very people who are meant to protect us are killing hundreds of unarmed people every year. It becomes alarmingly clear by looking at this data that arming officers is not as clear cut as it may otherwise appear- providing police guns does not always mean more protection, it can actually mean the opposite.

#### B. People who suffer from Mental Illness

Due to the lack of police training on how to handle people with mental illness, including drug abuses, "police encounters with individuals with mental health problems, drug addiction, or other conditions that can prompt erratic behavior; and with individuals who are unarmed or armed with a knife or weapon other than a fire- arm" (Robinson). There is a disproportionate number of mentally ill shot by police each year. When interactions with the police and those with

mental illness disproportionately end in the use of a lethal weapon, there is a problem that needs to be addressed. In 2014 alone, “at least 14 mentally ill people were shot by police, often after parents or other caretakers called seeking help, not lethal force” (Smithsimon). This problem will be reduced with the disarming of officers.

### C. Communities of Color

There is a massive disparity in the use of force used by police in communities of color, specifically in Black communities and against Black people. In the book “Fight the Power” Clarence Taylor highlights that “race [is] the major reason for police brutality and that false racial narratives [are] a major impediment to struggles for change (6)” (King 126). It has been reported that in 2017, police killed 1,147 people in the United States, “Black people were 25% of those killed despite being only 13% of the population” (Police Shooting Database). From 2010 to 2014, the American Journal of Public Health found that Black men “were nearly three times as likely to be killed by legal intervention than white men” (Vera). In this country “males, blacks, and youths were more likely to report experiencing the use or threat of force ...” by police officers (Hickman 577). The increased violence by police officers in communities of color largely has to do with the officer's own racial bias and fears that were predominantly created through fear based policies, such as the war on drugs, which labeled people of color (specifically males) as criminals. Implicit bias tests show that “Black people (especially black men) are more often associated or quickly paired with being ‘threatening,’ and this tends to hold true regardless of the race or ethnicity of the person taking the test” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 625). Since the use of lethal force is strongly determined by whether or not an officer feels threatened, it is more likely that an officer will use lethal force against people of color. It is clear that these

fear based policies and racist tendencies create an environment where escalation in the form of physical violence “is not the exception in heavily policed communities of color” but rather the rule (Smithsimon). Plant and Peruche found that in “shoot-don’t shoot” simulations, “officers were initially more likely to mistakenly shoot unarmed black suspects compared to unarmed white suspects” (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 626).

It is also believed that the police are ensuring that the status quo in America is upheld, as articulated by the argument in the anonymous collective *For a World Without the Police*. *For a World Without the Police* argues, “The police force was created to repress the growing numbers of poor people that accompanied the rise of industrial capitalism, while on plantations and in agricultural colonies, [the police] formed in response to the threat of slave revolt. This analysis outlines the core functions of policing under racial capitalism: protect the property of the capitalist class; maintain stable conditions for capital accumulation; and defend against any threats to these unequal conditions of rule (For a World Without Police 2016; see also Williams 2015; Whitehouse 2014).” (McDowell). The acknowledgement that people of color in America have been treated unjustly by the very people who are meant to protect them is not a new or groundbreaking thought; rather, the very acknowledgment of excessive gun usage by police officers toward Black people arose decades ago. In 1974, Paul Takagi an American criminologist stated ““Black people have been killed by the police at a tragically disproportionate rate, beyond the bounds of anything that would justify it.’ ... ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘the only immediate solution at this time is to disarm the police.’” (Berlatsky). It is remarkable that such an idea still appears revolutionary to society now. Yet, one would think if this issue has been observant for over 40 years it may be time for a radical idea.

Rather than disarming officers, the police have done quite the opposite. For instance, the LAPD militarized the police, using federal funds, making “police units ... even larger and more punitive, especially those directed at black gangs—all of this engineered through Bradley’s liberal law-and-order apparatus” (King 131). It is evident that the policies supported by the government focus on placing police officers and weapons in communities of color. The LAPD not only created anti-gang police units that are prejudiced against people of color, but they also “formed programs to surveil black and brown neighborhoods. Through these programs, the police implanted itself in educational and other public institutions” (King 132). The view that communities of color, specifically Black communities, need to have a constant watchdog is strongly correlated to the misconception that people of color are more dangerous due to their skin color and thus promote a basis of fear in the people who are meant to be serving the community.

#### D. Specific Incidents

An archetype of fear-based performance by police officers is exemplified in the death of Stephon Clark. On March 18, 2018, Stephon was confronted by police “in his grandmother’s backyard, they appeared to believe that he was holding a gun. In the dark of night, they opened fire — shooting 20 rounds and hitting the 22-year-old eight times, mostly from the back, according to an autopsy commissioned by the family. It turned out, though, that the officers had made a huge mistake: What they thought was a firearm was actually a cellphone” (Lopez). This tragic story is unfortunately not uncommon. Police, specifically when dealing with people of color, function in a shoot first ask questions later policy. This policy has led to officers shooting people after mistaking wrenches, wallets, badges etc. for guns. There have even been instances



where “Cops have shot people thinking that they’re reaching for a firearm when they’re really pulling up loose-fitting shorts. Police have shot multiple people thinking that a toy gun was a real firearm” (Lopez). The policies and mindset of officers need to adjust in order to ensure protection to citizens not harm.

### Why is it not a Conversation

In America, we rarely hear about the possibility of disarming police; the thought of police without guns seems radical, impossible, and utopian. Yet, as we still struggle to come up with the vocabulary and space to have these conversations, other countries are becoming safer and murdering fewer civilians by, in fact, disarming police, or never arming them in the first instance.. A crucial question we must ask ourselves is, “why?” The immediate easy to identify answer is that we have never had police without weapons before. We are quick to focus on the status quo and assume that the way it has always been done is the way it should continue to be done; but, we must promote change if we wish to see change. The issue of police murdering the very people they are meant to protect is an issue that almost all Americans wish to see change. Instead of focusing on individual police and individual departments, we must look at police as a whole.

#### A. Lack of Information

A massive issue with discussing the issue of lethal weapons used in America is that we are lacking information. The lack of a “ comprehensive record of the number of people killed by law enforcement” in the United States is unacceptable (The Counted). When attempting to engage in a conversation on disarmament one is unable to find consistent data on the number of people shot and killed by police officers every year. “This lack of basic data has been glaring

amid the protests, riots and worldwide debate set in motion by the fatal police shooting of Michael Brown, an unarmed 18-year-old, in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014” (The Counted).

As early as during the presidency of Bill Clinton, there was a call for a national reporting system on the use of force by police officers. The frustration of the people appeared to be answered with “the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act’s provisions calling on the U.S. Attorney General to ‘acquire data about the use of excessive force by law enforcement officers’ and to ‘publish an annual summary of the data’ (Title XXI, Subtitle D, Section 210402)” (Hickman 571). Despite this requirement, no data has been produced, apparently due to the fact that “Congress has provided no funds to support this mandate, and the Justice Department has issued no annual summaries of national level data about police use of force, excessive or otherwise” (Hickman 571). Despite many credible reports and sightings of police brutality and excessive force, still no credible information has been released to the public. The fact that we thus far do not systematically monitor the actions of the police is problematic. It becomes close to impossible to have an academic, productive conversation on the excessive use of lethal weapons by police officer’s when no comprehensive quantitative data exists. This problem has not been unknown to the government, rather it is quite public. For instance, “[b]efore stepping down as US attorney general in April 2015, Eric Holder described the prevailing situation on data collection as ‘unacceptable’” (The Counted).

Rather than following the lead of other countries such as Britain, where “every time a British police officer shoots and injures or kills someone, it is automatically referred to a separate watchdog called the Independent Police Complaints Commission, or IPCC,” the United States

continues to fuel the lack of credible data by creating a voluntary account of excessive force and deaths (Smith). “In early 2019, the Bureau launched a national use-of-force data collection program, recognizing the need for a comprehensive national database on this subject” (Robinson). This use of force collection, including “their annual count of ‘justifiable homicides’”, which it defines as “the killing of a felon in the line of duty,’ is entirely voluntary and thus leads to more confusing data (The Counted). Due to the voluntary nature of the system, it is arguably more problematic than not having a system at all. The data that has been collected has been proven to show “fluctuations in the number of agencies choosing to report figures, plus faulty reporting by agencies that do report, have resulted in partially informed news coverage pointing misleadingly to trends that may or may not exist” (The Counted). There is an enormous lack of police departments who even report their numbers to the FBI; “between 2005 and 2012 just 1,100 police departments – a fraction of America’s 18,000 police agencies – reported a ‘justifiable homicide’”(The Counted). The lack of agencies that report can make understanding the information published by the FBI very hard. In 2013, the latest year in which the information is available, “[t]he FBI system counted 461 justifiable homicides by law enforcement” (The Counted). This number, although large, does not accurately display the number of civilian deaths by the police in 2013. It is left to non-profits and the work of civilians to try to find the accurate number of lives taken by the police each year. In 2013, “Crowdsourced counts found almost 300 additional fatalities” to the FBI’s 461 (The Counted). The disparity in data can cause confusion and arguments on the accurateness of data. Not only are very few departments reporting, but also the departments reporting are not providing accurate numbers. It has been found that “[t]wo-thirds of agencies that provided data show no excessive-force allegations. Yet

some of those same agencies posted their own statistics on their websites showing they did receive such complaints in 2015” (Jacoby). For instance, both San Diego and San Jose listed “zeroes in the questions about excessive-force allegations” despite “local reports that show dozens of force allegations” (Jacoby). This lack of concrete data leads to more issues and confusion when attempting to have a conversation on how to change the policies that allow for many civilians to be murdered by the police each year. It is shocking that “no one anywhere comprehensively tracks the most significant act police can do in the line of duty: take a life,” according to the Las Vegas Review-Journal in its series Deadly Force (Nov. 28, 2011)” (Fatal Encounters). In order to engage in a productive conversation, it is crucial to have all the information; yet, due to the lack of reporting, any suggestion of reform appears to be at a clear disadvantage.

#### B. Gun Culture in the United States

America is very different from the vast majority of first-world countries due to its “embrace of civilian gun ownership [which] makes police work more dangerous in the United States than in other developed countries, a phenomenon that in turn contributes to officers killing nearly 1,000 people each year” (Roehall). America’s extreme gun culture creates a society in which it seems necessary that the police have the same or more sophisticated/lethal weapons as its citizens. If a police officer is unable to protect himself it would be impossible for him to protect the public. This observation is echoed in Chicago Police Officer Louis Hayes’ statement that “[t]here is simply too much violence being committed by criminals with firearms to even consider an unarmed police force in the United States’... ‘I doubt there is a community, a city, a local government, or a police union in the entire nation that would seriously consider disarming

its protectors'” (Berlatsky). According to this understanding of America’s pervasive gun culture, it is arguably a futile idea to attempt to have officers firearm free. It is unlikely that officers in England confront as many civilians with guns as officers in America due to England’s gun control laws. Franklin Zimring, “a legal scholar and criminal justice expert at the University of California, Berkeley,” came to a similar conclusion after his study: “The rate of fatal assaults on American officers is 25 times greater than on British police” (Rosenhall). This information clearly informs us that the proliferation of guns in America creates a more violent society than other countries that effectively disarmed their police. This suggests that in order to diminish the violence committed by police officers, it may make sense to think of police shootings as linked to America’s gun problem.

### C. Gun Violence Against Police

The copious amount of guns in America due to America's gun culture creates many problems for police officers. Due to many civilians owning guns, officers enter any situation with the understanding that there is a possibility of there being a gun. Two recent tragedies further confirm this danger, “Sacramento Police Officer Tara O’Sullivan, who was gunned down last month when she arrived at a house where a domestic violence victim had asked for help. And to Davis Police Officer Natalie Corona, who was ambushed by a gunman while helping at the scene of a car accident” (White 184). Gun culture in America makes policing a more dangerous job. I am going to continue to look for research on supposedly non-lethal situations becoming lethal, which will help indicate if a system where an officer's gun is left in the patrol car until needed or calling in backup to bring weapons would be sufficient in the United States. Zimring “studied attacks on American officers over six years and found that gunshots caused

more than 97 percent of their deaths” (Rosenhall). It makes logical sense that the pervasiveness of guns is correlated to more police shootings. Not only because suspects may have guns requiring police officers to match that force with a gun as well, but also because the fear of a person having a gun puts the officer on edge and he is then more likely to shoot when in fear. Tracy Meares, a policing expert at Yale Law School reiterates this point stating, ““In situations where police officers say, ‘I was in fear for my life,’ and later substantiate that with, ‘I thought the person had a gun,’ the reasonableness of someone’s assumption that somebody could possibly have a gun is naturally related to the prevalence of guns in the environment”” (Lopez). This leads to the supposition that states with stricter gun control laws would be less likely to have unwarranted police shootings. It is also shown that “the higher the gun ownership rates, the more police killings” (Lopez). When there are less guns and more restrictions, police officers are safer and less fearful so less likely to make a rash decision due to fear.

In light of the real concerns for the lives of police officers, an important question is whether guns are the most useful defense to an attack. The FBI obtains data on the number of officers killed every year; they found that “an average of 51 officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty” (FBI National Press Office). I will analyze the data collected from 2013-2019 in order to understand the extent of lethal force used against police. In 2013, “statistics released today by the FBI show that 27 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed” (FBI National Press Office), 26 of these officers were killed by firearms. Of these, “[s]ix of the officers fired their own weapons, and three officers attempted to fire their service weapons. Two victim officers had their weapons stolen; one officer was killed with his own weapon” (FBI National Press Office). In 2014, “51 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty”;

46 of these deaths were caused by firearms (FBI National Press Office). Of these, “[f]ive of the 51 officers killed fired their own weapons, and six officers attempted to fire their service weapons. Seven victim officers had their weapons stolen; one officer was killed with his own weapon” (FBI National Press Office). In 2015, “41 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty;” 38 of the 41 officers were killed by firearms (FBI National Press Office). “Six of the 41 slain officers fired their own weapons, and six officers attempted to fire their service weapons. Three victim officers had their weapons stolen; three officers were killed with their own weapons” (FBI National Press Office). In 2016, “66 law enforcement officers were feloniously killed in the line of duty;” 62 of the 66 officers were killed by firearms (FBI National Press Office). It was reported that “[f]ourteen of the 66 slain officers fired their service weapons, and 10 officers attempted to fire their weapons. Three victim officers had their weapons stolen; one officer was killed with his own weapon” (FBI National Press Office). In 2017, “46 officers died as a result of felonious acts” and 42 of these deaths were caused by firearms. For unknown reasons, the FBI stopped reporting the number of officers who fired their weapons, attempted to fire their weapons, had their weapons stolen, and were killed by their own weapon. In 2018, 55 officers were killed due to felonious activity; “[o]ffenders used firearms to kill 51 of the 55 victim officers” (FBI National Press Office). In 2019, the most recent data collected, 48 officers were killed due to felonious activity and “[o]ffenders used firearms to kill 44 of the 48 victim officers” (FBI National Press Office). These numbers, although low in comparison to civilians killed by police, are evidence that the danger to police is palpable. This palpability dissuades conversations on disarming police in America.

### Police Policy in the United States

### A. Humanity of Police

It is crucial to remember that police officers are not any less human than the rest of us: they have fears, biases, and opinions. The United States “employ[s] more than 730,000 officers who have the legal authority to deprive citizens of their liberty and use a variety of coercive tactics, which include lethal and nonlethal physical force (Reaves, 2007)” (Hickman 563) . It is salient to the research to understand that police officers are just normal people.

It can be quite unnerving to remember that “[p]olice-officers are nothing but ordinary people with a badge and some special skills” (Jussila 249). To become an officer, a person must go to the police academy to train, the “police academy varies from one department to the other. The average is around 13-19 weeks” and a high school degree (Police Officer EDU). It takes less than half a year to learn the skills required to become a police officer. It has been researched that people attracted to the occupation of becoming a police officer are commonly “ inclined towards controlling others and perhaps those trying to inflate their ego with the authority and uniform” (Jussila 249). Giving someone with these inclinations a lethal weapon creates a hierarchy in which they are placed at the top. Citizens place their lives in the hands of a stranger and not only are citizens meant to trust this stranger, but they also provide him with military level weapons to move freely around their city.

### B. Reasonable Force Policies

Despite being normal people, police officers “have the legal authority to use force in various situations, such as when they seek to protect themselves and the public, make an arrest, overcome resistance, or gain control of a potentially dangerous situation (Walker & Katz, 2002)” (White 171). There is a large issue with the ability of police officers to use force, not only



because they are normal people who can legally hurt another person but also because “[t]here is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of use of force” (National Institute of Justice). An officer’s goal while on duty is to command respect and “regain control as soon as possible while protecting the community. Use of force is an officer’s last option” (National Institute of Justice). Despite there not being one definition for use of force, “[t]he International Association of Chiefs of Police has described use of force as the ‘amount of effort required by police to compel compliance by an unwilling subject’” (National Institute of Justice). This becomes an issue when charging an officer for using excessive force. The standard for using force was decided by the US Supreme Court in 1989 in the case of *Graham v. Connor*. “Justices said using force is acceptable if it is ‘objectively reasonable’ -- in other words, if another officer in similar circumstances would have acted the same way” (Vera). This standard allows police to become the decision makers in using force. The use of lethal force is decided predominately by whether an officer feels threatened. Thus if another officer could also claim to feel threatened in an identical or similar situation, the use of force used must be considered acceptable.

### C. Continuum of Force

The policy commonly accepted by police officers and police departments across the nation is called the continuum of force. The continuum of force policy asserts that the officer shall match the force used by the perpetrator, meaning that if a perpetrator is holding a weapon that can reasonably be lethal, an officer can take out his gun. It is the officer’s job to decide whether a weapon is lethal or not. The belief is that if lethal force is presented, an officer should never be at a disadvantage to a perpetrator. This view allows a system where “we teach our police officers to lead with the gun” (del Ponzio). This means that knives, cars, and anything else

that could be considered lethal by a police officer can and should be met with a gun. By pulling out a gun, it eliminates that ability to properly “communicate with a person in crisis” (del Pozo). The power of deciding how much force is reasonable is considered mitigated by the continuum of force to “guide officer decision making based on the amount of danger or resistance present during an encounter with a citizen” (White 171). This practice allows for “American police officers [to] shoot and kill well over 125 people armed with knives” every year (del Pozo).

#### D. California Law

Changes in policies are being and could be created that redefine the police and civilian relationship. For instance, in California “Gov. Gavin Newsom on Monday signed Assembly Bill 392, which changes the standard for police officers’ justified use of deadly force from instances when it’s ‘reasonable’ to when it’s ‘necessary’” (Ortiz). The bill authorizes officers to use deadly force only when it is necessary to avoid serious injury or death to the officer “that is, if, given the totality of the circumstances, there was no reasonable alternative to using deadly force, including warnings, verbal persuasion, or other nonlethal methods of resolution or de-escalation” (Vera). This bill is intended to reduce the number of lives lost at the hands of police officers. According to the American Civil Liberties Union which proposed the bill and negotiated the changes, this law is the strongest language of any state in the United States (Ortiz). Despite this strong language, it does not appear that much has changed by renaming reasonable to necessary. Still no universal definition exists for what necessary means and thus it continues to rely on the reasonable officer standard.

#### E. Lack of Accountability

It has become evident that police accountability for lost lives is lacking; accordingly, “[b]etween 2013 and 2019, 99% of [police] killings resulted in no charges, according to Mapping Police Violence” (Higgins). There are various reasons why prosecutors do not charge police officers. One of these reasons is police officers are rarely convicted due to laws protecting them. A doctrine known as “qualified immunity” is known to protect police from charges of excessive force in cases that do not involve a “clearly established” violation of the laws (Cornell Law School Legal Information Institute). This standard only applies to government officials and has led to the dismissal of “police brutality lawsuits on grounds that there is no prior court decision with nearly identical facts” (Totenberg). In addition, as, as described above, the reasonable standard for excessive force states that if another officer would have used the same amount of force it is not criminal. This standard thus “makes it challenging to hold officers criminally liable for use of force (including shootings), cities and departments can choose to define when force is excessive and adopt a higher professional standard in their use-of-force policies, holding officers accountable through discipline — up to and including termination” (All In Cities). It is also incredibly challenging to convict an officer due to the fact that the federal statute used to “evaluate police shootings requires a finding that the officer willfully or intentionally sought to kill someone” (Vera). Hence, the lack of indictments of officers for excessive force is due to the low probability of conviction.

### Philosophy of Police Authority

The gun given to police officers creates a power dynamic. The power dynamic is fueled by the notion that normal people with some special training have the ability to kill another person and face little accountability. The issue becomes that people respect the gun, not the officer.

Given the job and weapons given to police officers to enforce the laws, they “rank among the most powerful occupations in society, what compounds their ability to use their power is that they are often in contact with relatively powerless and disenfranchised citizens who may be unable to resist an officer’s illegitimate use of that power” (Robinson). Guns create an issue and danger in and of themselves. “They enable a policing philosophy built on violence and forced compliance, rather than one founded on respect, trust and consent. That philosophy affects every police interaction, even those that don’t involve actual shooting” (Berlatsky). When a person respects or fears the gun an officer is holding it affects every interaction with the police. The knowledge that an officer can kill someone at any point is terrifying and causes fear towards officers. Officers wear their guns visible on their belt so that everyone is aware of their power. It becomes a question of what makes an officer: the gun or the badge? Disarming the police in America requires a ““revolutionary transformation of society as a whole, since removing their ability to inflict violence prevents the police from maintaining capitalist exploitation and oppression’ (For a World Without Police 2016)” (McDowell 13). The philosophy of authority in the United States surrounds the notion of violence more than the view of respect. It is evident in our system that some people may not respect the laws but due to fear of punishment or violence, they follow those law anyway. This view can be allegorical to officers; many people do not respect or trust the officer but due to fear of being hurt or killed, they abide by the officer's authority. But the power dynamic between police and civilians must be rectified for sustainable change to occur.

### Lack of Trust in the Police

The fact that police carry lethal weapons on their bodies at all times while on duty creates a large power gap in which civilians are aware that a police officer is capable of killing them at any point if they so choose. A gun is a remarkably powerful weapon and giving regular people the power to go anywhere with it creates a pyramid of authority. Research has established that “Americans feel less safe rather than more safe as more people in their community begin to carry guns” (Hemenway 282). Communities of color, in particular, lack trust in police. This lack of trust is evidenced by increased violence and force. This increase in force and lack of trust is also seen in low income communities. “As Mitchell Duneier (1999), Peter Moskos (2009) and others have observed, police interactions in low-income communities revolve around issues of respect. Police demand respect, civilians resent disrespect, and interactions become confrontations that escalate into mistreatment, abuse, and violence.” (Smithsimon). A foundation of trust is required for officers' authority to be respected but, due to the weapons on an officer's belt, the respect is put on the gun rather than the person. Disarming police could increase trust in officers by decreasing the power disparity between civilians and the police. It is evident that “Everyone is less safe when trust erodes between the police and the communities they serve” (Warren). Yet we allow officers to continue to wear a gun on their belt, a weapon that we are aware makes people feel less safe and thus actually creates a less safe environment.

### Are Guns Necessary?

In America, there is a general consensus that we can not remove arms from police officers due to the fact that civilians are easily able to acquire weapons. Many believe that there “is simply too much violence being committed by criminals with firearms to even consider an unarmed police force in the United States” (Berlatsky). The view that officers need guns in

order to perform their jobs safely is the status quo we are accustomed to, but this may not be the truth. There are many issues with police having guns that go beyond the act of police firing of their weapons. The gun in itself creates a more dangerous atmosphere for civilians and police. “Surveys of police who are unarmed find that their concerns include not only danger to civilians, but the psychological harm done to police who fire weapons, and a belief that arming police makes officers’ jobs more dangerous (Squires and Kennison 2010)” (Smithsimon). Not only do guns create more danger but also most police work is completed without guns. For instance, in the “1990s, nearly 95% of New York City officers had never fired their weapon in the line of duty (Rostker *et al.* 1998). And during most violent crimes—an armed mugging, for instance—the police are not at the scene, often arriving well past the event. What police do day to day—patrolling neighborhoods, substituting for an inadequate mental health system, conducting traffic stops, calming disputes, and filling out paperwork—not only doesn’t need a gun, but is safer done without one” (Smithsimon). There are officers in America such as park police and some campus police officers who do not carry guns at all. There is the view that “police leaders on the front lines responding to crisis cannot wait for more rigorous academic studies to arrive and are, therefore, moving ahead to implement change with the best knowledge available” (Robinson). Due to this view, police are being militarized despite guns leading to thousands of deaths every year.

### Other Countries

#### A. Police Policies and Homicides in other Countries

Countries including England, Norway, Republic of Ireland, Iceland, Wales, and New Zealand do not have their police officers armed. In England, the police are firearm free; if there

is an event in which lethal weapons are necessary, they “can call on the assistance of Authorized Firearms Officers to respond. These officers have special training in the use of firearms and are ready to respond when the situation calls for it” (Roufa). This system is very functional, allowing for officers to conduct their duties without promoting fear and stress but instead ensuring that they have help when needed. Police officers in London understand the goal of their protocol as “mak[ing] sure that [their] firearms response continues to come from a group of highly specialist and highly skilled officers.” (Berlatsky). This protocol can be viewed as very successful especially when one considers that in 2015, the United States police “killed about 1,000 people [...], while the police in Great Britain fired their guns three times all year—and killed no one” (Smithsimon).

America is an outlier in the world for the number of deaths caused by police officers shooting people due in part to the fact that multiple other countries’ officers do not carry guns. As evident by “England and Wales, where officers generally do not carry firearms,[and where] police didn’t kill anyone between March 2012 and March 2014. In comparison, New York City police shot and killed 16 people in 2012 alone”(Berlatsky). In summary, in America, one city’s police officers shot and killed more people in one year than two countries did in two years. A recent “analysis by the Guardian found that ‘US police kill more in days than other countries do in years.’ Between 1990 and 2014, police in England and Wales shot and killed 55 people” (Lopez). Despite the United States being a larger country as far as population, fatal police shootings are not nearly proportional (Lopez). More specifically, the “US is nearly six times as populous as England and Wales, but [...], has hundreds of times the fatal police shootings”. It is critical to dispel the notion that the number of deaths by police in the United States can be

explained by population. In Scotland, police have said that: “We’ve shot two or three people in the last 10 years. The last police shooting was three and a half years ago. To put it in some context, we have 1.8 million emergency calls a year” (US Commission on Civil Rights 750). The success of the United Kingdom’s protocol is critical to study as it draws into question the necessity of police officers carrying lethal force.

The protocol promotes de-escalation policies in the UK. As evident by the fact that “[d]espite having similar rates of knife attacks against police officers, in all but four cases in 2017, officers in the UK handled the situation without resorting to the use of firearms” (US Commission in Civil Rights 749). The protocol makes officers stress the training of pacifying a situation prior to using a weapon. A specific incident worth highlighting is in August of 2016, in London, “a teenager suffering an episode of paranoid schizophrenia killed an American tourist in a busy London street, armed police rushed to the scene but not a single bullet was fired” (Smith). The policy of the ‘New Police’ was created by Englishman Robert Peel, “the idea faced profound and widespread hostility. Peel and his colleagues realised that the police could not defeat the mass of the population by force. Policing by consent was the only option” (Waddington). The protocol was considered revolutionary at the time but now many countries have adopted similar policies.

Other countries, including the Republic of Ireland, Iceland and New Zealand, follow similar systems where the police do not carry guns but other officers do and are available for backup. (Roufa). It is crucial in these countries that those trained to properly and effectively shoot a gun in order to subdue a situation are the people doing the shooting. Norway follows a slightly different protocol where officers do not keep their firearms on their belt but they do keep



them sealed and unloaded in their patrol car (Roufa). This system allows officers to have a friendly relationship with the public but have an immediate weapon if necessary. In many other countries “[o]ne clear commonality is that police officers are almost always required to give warning before using a firearm, except if there is no time or if giving such a warning would cause more serious and dangerous consequences” (Boring). In Brazil, it is even necessary to use two non-lethal weapons prior to lethal (Boring). Both of these requirements recognize the humanity and life of the suspect. Examining other countries allows us to see that the current American police system is not the only functional system of law enforcement. It is possible and has been successful to change the conventional view that police must carry guns on their person while on duty.

#### B. Leadership in Other Countries

According to Prime Minister of Iceland David Oddsson, “police in Iceland operate ‘by consent, rather than through the explicit threat or use of force. The effectiveness of any police force to protect and serve the public depends to a great extent on having the consent of the people. And having police officers that are not armed with guns helps remove barriers between the police and the public and builds trust on both sides.’” (Berlatsky). Leaders of other countries are able to see the unhealthy division created between police and citizens when lethal force is readily available. Yet in a country where over a 1000 people died last year due to police shootings, there is little discussion of disarmament. Furthermore, in 2010, the New Zealand Commissioner of Police stated: “International experience shows that making firearms more accessible to police raises certain risks that are very difficult to control” (Disarm the Police). The risks and considerations included: the “[r]isk of police having weapons taken from them,

[the r]isk of greater use of weapons against the public and/or offenders, and [a]mbush can never be controlled, whether or not officers are armed” (Disarm the Police). The international community is focused on understanding and mitigating the power dynamics of police and placing public safety above violence. It is evident that outside of the US there is more of a focus on the life of the suspect rather than the life of the officer.

### C. Different Gun Cultures

A possible explanation for different gun policies is the different gun cultures amongst civilians. As discussed, America leads the world with the ownership of guns and thus police officers face more of a risk of being met with guns. As exemplified by Zimring [...] “[t]he rate of fatal assaults on American officers is 25 times greater than on British police and 40 times greater than on German police, he found. Similarly, the rate of police shootings in those nations is a tiny fraction of what it is in the U.S.” (Rosenhall). The tighter gun control in Europe allows for police to be less concerned about encountering firearms when confronting citizens. It is clear that it is easier for police to stay unarmed when citizens are unarmed. An outlier to this statement is Iceland. Iceland police patrol completely unarmed yet “an estimated one-third of Iceland residents own guns, making the country 15th worldwide in gun ownership per capita” (Berlatsky). In Iceland's history “[t]here is only one recorded incident of a suspect shot and killed by police” (Berlatsky).

## Non-lethal Options

### A. Non-lethal weapons

Non-lethal weapons are rather controversial in the United States. There are issues both internationally and nationally but given the nature of my research, I will only be focusing on the

domestic use of non-lethal weapons predominately avoiding discussion of chemical weapons. Non-lethal weapons are defined by the Department of Defense as ““weapons systems that are explicitly designed and primarily employed so as to incapacitate personnel or materiel, while minimizing fatalities, permanent injury to personnel, and undesired damage to property and the environment”” (Coppernoll 115). Similar to the overall discussion of non-lethal weapons, academics cannot come to a consensus on what weapons are actually “non-lethal.” For the basis of my research, I will define a non-lethal weapon as any weapon that does not have the intention to cause substantial permanent injury. Non-lethal weapons can be very useful to officers and will likely orchestrate a more peaceful environment than aiming a gun at a person. When an officer is not armed with a lethal weapon they “will cultivate an instinct to de-escalate: They will keep a safe distance, they will try to assess the true level of threat rather than see a weapon as a cue to rapidly escalate, and they will communicate in ways that reach people” (del Pozo). An environment like that is far more optimal for helping a person in distress than threatening his or her life with a gun and yelling at them (del Pozo).

There are many different types of non-lethal weapons: batons, OC spray, tasers, rubber bullets, etc. Not only are there many weapons, there are also “many types of ammunition that meet the requirement of injury avoidance. The velocity of a properly designed and correctly used projectile is sufficient to cause a stunning blow and pain but nothing more serious” (Jussila 259). In most prisons, guards do not use real bullets in a fight but rather rubber bullets which cause pain and can cause a suspect to collapse or drop his weapons.

A major issue that non-lethal weapons face is that they are not nearly as effective as a gun. Most non-lethal weapons require an officer to be at a close distance with the suspect,

something that can not always occur, especially not if there is another weapon involved. “The tactical range of a baton is about one metre, irritant sprays and electric tasers work at two to three metres. The normal tactical range of a 9 x 19mm pistol is 10-15 metres [...] However, it must be noted that the maximum range of a spray or a taser is not much longer than its tactical range, whereas a pistol bullet can still be lethal when discharged hundreds of metres away” (Jussila 255). In many situations an officer is not able to move very close to a suspect in order for their taser or spray to be an applicable weapon. Even weapons that are meant to act similarly to guns are not always beneficial. In order for a weapon to be useful, it must be consistent; “the traditional 'skip fire' wooden or plastic projectiles are unacceptable because of their poor accuracy. They are intended for shooting as ricochets from the surface of the street (hence 'skip fire')- To a large extent the trajectory of such a projectile is unpredictable and can hit a person's leg, genitals or face with equal probability, causing serious injury or in some cases death” (Jussila 254). The possibility of hurting a civilian is too large of a risk for police to use these projectiles consistently.

There is certainly a need to develop more effective and versatile non-lethal weapons. Presently, besides a gun, “no other effective instrument of defence against a knife which can cause deep stab and large slash wounds with the risk of lethal loss of blood and severe injury to internal organs.” (Jussila 253). I personally feel that the use of rubber bullets may be suitable, but as of now officers do not carry them while on duty. More research and energy must be put into creating dependable rubber/plastic bullets. Another controversial option is using medication such as tranquilizers; “it is occasionally claimed that it is inhumane for police to shoot a syringe filled with calmative or sleep inducing agent into an object person and that this would also represent an

unauthorized use of medical authority” (Jussila 259). Although this argument has some basis, I believe it is even more inhumane to kill a person and not allow them rights that we are guaranteed, specifically the right to a fair trial. Looking at a person as a target devalues life and abolishes the salient ideology in our country that one is innocent until proven guilty- sentencing someone immediately to death certainly does not allow for a suspect to tell his story. The non-lethal nature of these weapons does not mean that they can not be abused; but, while deaths may still occur, they are less likely.

#### B. Tasers

An example of a non-lethal weaponry that has been widely accepted is the taser. A taser is certainly not a perfect weapon. It is a perfect archetype to many non-lethal weapons, yet there are not perfect lethal weapons either. The Los Angeles Police Department found that “data from randomly selected incidents not involving firearms in 1989 overwhelmingly indicate that nonlethal weapons are as effective as other force types” (Meyer 10). This information alongside a relatively high success record has caused more police agencies to rely on the taser to stop combative suspects (White 170). Tasers were “rated as effective 82.7% of the time” (TASER International, 2002) (White 175). Tasers are used commonly due to “80% of the study cases, the TASER was deemed—by the officer—to have performed satisfactorily. It is not surprising that the 20% of cases where officers rated the TASER as performing poorly (n = 46) include all of the cases where the suspect was not immediately subdued” (White 184). The taser has been an important weapon due to it typically causing significantly less harm than guns- there are of course exceptions and abuse of a weapon. Yet tasers can be rather difficult due to the close range they require to be used effectively and necessity for open space to get both prongs to hit their

target or else it will fail. The instances of a taser not being effective do not dismiss it as a relatively efficient weapon.

### Police Training

As previously mentioned, the police academy in the United States takes about six months to complete. This timeline is rather different from Norway where 3 years of training is required, Finland where about 2 years of training is required, and Iceland where 2 years of training is required (MacGuill). Despite the minimal training time, America provides police officers with guns to wear on their belts, unlike Norway, Finland, and Iceland where officers are unarmed. In the United States, we do not train officers to properly use the guns we give them. As previously stated, Plant and Peruche's study found that officers were more likely to shoot Black unarmed suspects in shoot/don't shoot simulations, but with "repeated exposure with the program and extensive training—in which race was unrelated to the presence of a gun—this bias could be eliminated" (US Commission on Civil Rights 627). In America, guns are given to officers at the beginning of their training. It has been suggested that only during the "final phase of a police academy should trainees be presented with a firearm and taught how to use it. Officers should be taught that their weapons protect not only themselves and the public but also the life of the person who is armed and in distress, because they provide a means to stay safe if a calm and reassuring approach fails" (del Ponzo). In America, we currently have officers treating guns like they are persuasive devices rather than insurance policies. It is clear that it would be safer to have "police officers whose first instinct is to communicate with the people they encounter and whose success lies in getting the psychology of persuasion right" (del Ponzo). It has been shown that police homicides can be "reduced by as much as 25 percent by employing

policy solutions that require officers to exhaust all other means before shooting and those that require comprehensive reporting” (All in Cities). There needs to be a larger focus on de-escalation techniques in the police academy; “De-escalation techniques are meant to train officers not to automatically respond in tense situations that may lead them to act on subconscious biases and resort to using unnecessary force” (US Commission on Civil Rights 703). Nonetheless, trainers have recently stated that “there has been less emphasis on the method for the past 20 years” (US Commission on Civil Rights). Trainers cite that “the major barrier [to implementing de-escalation policies][is] the lack of available funding for this training (US Commission on Civil Rights 787). If we insist on arming our officers with lethal weapons, better training is necessary.

### Conclusion

America faces a significant public safety problem as a result of the armament of police officers. This problem is often ignored, deemed incapable of change, or met with more weapons. Yet, as discussed in this paper, other countries have successfully removed guns from police officers. Even if police and their advocates in America resist disarmament, non-lethal options and a larger focus on de-escalation training could change the dynamic that so often leads to the unnecessary use of a gun by the police. My research indicates that the effects of disarming police will go beyond police shootings and change the way people view and interact with police officers all together. In America, the armament of police officers focuses on the safety of the officer and not the public. My research strongly indicates that public safety will be improved with the disarmament of police officers.

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