Why are US police so prone to violence?

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MICHAEL BROWN, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice. These are just the most high-profile police killings that have taken place in the US since July. They have sparked protests around the country, and researchers say they are symptomatic of police becoming dangerously out of kilter with the communities they are meant to protect and serve.

Why are police in the US so violent? Brown and Garner were stopped for the most minor of reasons—jaywalking in Brown’s case, while a police officer choked Garner to death after accusing him of hawking cigarettes. Rice was just 12 years old, playing with a toy gun in a playground when he was shot.

Although statistics on how often police kill someone in the US are sketchy, the FBI reported 461 "justifiable homicides" in 2013. Other efforts to assess police killings through media reports have recorded more than double that number.

William Terrill, who studies police behaviour at Michigan State University in East Lansing, says the "broken windows" style of policing, in which officers crack down aggressively on minor infractions like fare-dodging and graffiti, may be partly to blame. Communities with high levels of poverty and high proportions of non-white residents are often the focus of broken-windows operations. This can cause a feeling among citizens that police are constantly harassing them. "That aggressive crime-fighting style comes at a cost," Terrill says. "Sometimes you may garner more social capital with the community by not acting, especially with these low-level crimes," he says. "Maybe I'm just going to say, 'I'm gonna take a drive and would you guys mind moving on before I get back?'"

The most egregious police violence could be avoided by giving officers empathy training to help them see those committing crimes as people, Terrill argues. He points to San Diego in California and Madison in Wisconsin as cities on the right path with their police forces. "They make the same number of arrests [as other cities] but they don't use force nearly as much," he says.

Treating police and the communities they serve as a system - rather than a series of isolated events - can help as well, says Rod Brunson, who studies police-community relations at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey. "It's not just one interaction that happens between individual officers and citizens. It's a cumulative and repeated set of interactions," he says. "If you listen to the Eric Garner audio, he made some reference to 'this happens every day, why are you all bothering me again?' It feels like harassment."

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