

Expert on violence assesses police brutality and mass shootings in America

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Tage Rai is a psychologist and assistant professor of management at UC San Diego's Rady School of Management who studies ethics and violence. He co-authored the book "Virtuous Violence," outlining

research that finds that most acts of violence are driven by moral motives on the part of perpetrators. That is, perpetrators believe they are doing the right thing when they hurt and kill their victims.

In this Q&A, Rai, who teaches negotiation at the Rady School, addresses dual crises impacting America—police brutality and [gun violence](#)—and what can be done to prevent them.

A lot of your work is focused on understanding why people hurt other people, so we can better understand motives to treat and prevent violence. In the case of police brutality, it has garnered more attention in recent years because it is increasingly caught on tape and yet instances continue to persist; why is that?

I think that if you want to prevent [violence](#), then the first key is understanding the motives that underlie it. We need to confront the possibility that actually a lot of violence isn't driven by an absence of morality in the minds of perpetrators. It's actually driven by a presence of moralistic and ideological motivation.

In the case of police brutality, ethnographic and historical evidence suggests that [police officers](#) involved may view themselves as authorities who demand respect and obedience from civilians. I outlined this in chapter four of "Virtuous Violence" [as] "...the right and obligation of parents, police, kings and gods to violently enforce their authority." In this context, officers believe that they are entitled to hurt civilians and that bystanders should trust their judgment absolutely—anything less than absolute trust is perceived as betrayal and disloyalty. The worst offenses are disrespect, disobedience or any effort to harm the officer. Such offenses are worse even than the crimes that police are tasked with

preventing. Spitting in the face of an officer or cursing them out might be more likely to result in police brutality than robbing a store or harming another civilian.

How much is race a factor in police brutality?

This authority relationship also takes on racial connotations, with some officers seeing themselves as warriors policing "the enemy," largely composed of Black citizens who are seen as less worthy of full citizenship and who pose a threat to the social hierarchy that the police defend.

Officers of all races use force against Black civilians more than white, but those effects are at least somewhat reduced when officers are Black too. However, race of the officers alone won't solve the problem of police brutality.

What do think are some of the possible solutions to curb police brutality?

First, I think it's important to focus on what is called "subtraction neglect," which refers to the phenomenon wherein people are trying to improve something. In many cases, they have a bias toward coming up with solutions that add to the design rather than subtract from it. In the context of policing, this means that when faced with police brutality, our immediate intuition is to think that the answer is more training, more personnel, more resources, more funding. This is instead of a more obvious solution—that we should give police fewer responsibilities to reduce police-civilian interactions as well as less funding for weaponizing and militarization of the police. Such calls to "defund the police" are always met with opposition because we have a bias toward thinking that reducing funding means that we care less about public

safety, but that's just a cognitive bias. What could be more effective is allocating those same resources toward social services, mental health responders, community infrastructure, jobs programs and even universal basic income.

Beyond these efforts, I see reform taking place in three different categories:

- **Motivational**—we have to change the culture of policing. The Scorpion unit in Memphis was explicitly tasked with "restoring peace" through the use of force. The very acronym (which stands for Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in Our Neighborhoods) casts them as deadly warriors fighting in hostile territory against enemy combatants instead of as civil servants who work for the citizens in those communities. Police departments routinely hold seminars where speakers come in to tell them that their lives are in danger every day, they need to kill or be killed, that they cannot trust the people in the communities that they police, that they are only accountable to each other and at the same time should never question each other about whether their actions were right.
- **Structural**—As I mentioned, diversifying police around the country should be a priority, as there is solid research to suggest that diversifying the police force, which is currently about 80% white, does help to mitigate use of force. Moreover, there must be greater accountability. There are cities across America where it is unclear whether the police station or the mayor's office is in charge. There are sheriffs who are drawing on obscure legal clauses to claim that they have authority over the President. Government at all levels has to crack down on this and the longer it goes on, the more dangerous it becomes. One of the primary characteristics of a functioning state is that it has to have a

monopoly on the legitimate use of force. If the [police](#) are n't accountable, then we either have a failed state, or they are terrorizing minority communities with implicit permission from the state.

- Cognitive—There is exciting new work on violence reduction that focuses on cognitive behavioral style strategies. In the context of policing, this means getting officers out of "thinking traps" wherein they only assume the worst-case scenarios and instead focusing them on considering alternative hypotheses for why someone might be behaving the way they are. Critically, this doesn't mean necessarily reducing vigilance or slowing down your response time in ways that could be dangerous, it just means that with the time officers have to assess a situation, they should try to consider more alternative strategies. More broadly, having officers avoid unnecessary chases or pursuits that can trigger more reactive thinking rather than more reflective thinking.

Your work also addresses an increase in mass shootings that are plaguing the nation. We know these numbers increase every year, with over 50 in January 2023 alone. Are these shootings inspiring each other?

Mass shootings are defined based on the number of people who are harmed, not the motives of the shooter. I'd be hesitant to assume that people involved in mass shootings that are motivated by gang disputes, workplace grievances, [white supremacy](#), misogyny or bullying are necessarily drawing inspiration from each other. I think it's more likely that when we see, for example a spate of shootings in California, that's just a coincidence that becomes more likely as the number of mass shootings increases overall.

It should be noted that while the number of mass shootings continues to

climb, data shows mass shootings account for less than 2% of all annual homicide deaths in the United States, yet they garner the most attention. We are probably not paying enough attention or giving enough resources to the other kinds of gun violence that go on. We're not paying enough attention to violence in the home, we're not paying enough attention to suicide deaths by gun, we're not paying enough attention to a lot of other kinds of gun violence that we see.

Is increased mental illness a factor in the rise of gun violence?

Mental illness contributes to less than 5% of all gun violence. The vast majority of mass shootings are going to be committed by people who have no diagnosable mental health illness prior to the incident. The vast majority who have been diagnosed with a mental health illness are never going to engage in a shooting. Even if [mental illness](#) is involved in gun violence, it's a mistake to think that we can use mental health diagnoses to identify the small subset of shooters. Instead, such efforts will just stigmatize those who benefit from mental health services.

There's a broader question in how we think about violence. I think people have a kind of implicit belief—and I think a lot of academics do, too—that a sane, rational, mentally healthy person would not hurt another human being. If they're harming someone, killing someone, it must be because something has gone wrong in their psychology.

A lot of my research argues that this belief is just not true. Most of the time when people hurt other people it's because they feel that they're doing it for the right reasons. They think that a person deserves it—that they have a moral obligation to hurt those people. What's really driving this is not mental illness—at least not in the diagnosable sense.

Are there any other factors driving mass shootings?

Many shooters, especially in the American context, are often misogynistic, White supremacists. They are often young men searching for meaning through violence. With those factors coming together, these shooters justify violence because they feel that they're "defending something greater than themselves" when they attack people.

What can we do prevent more gun related deaths?

One of the proposed solutions to better address the problem of gun violence is treating mental illness, so we can identify a perpetrator before a violent act is committed. And we can't. Trying to identify mentally ill shooters through health screening is like looking for a needle in a haystack. And there are always going to be needles that get through. The only way it's going to work is preventing those "needles" from getting AR-15s.

What we find when we look at violence across the world, not just [mass shootings](#), but all sorts of violence, is that most of the time when people hurt others, they think it's the right thing to do. They think that their social communities are going to praise them for it. And, in some cases their particular communities will. So, in the case of, for example, the Highland Park shooter, the community we need to be thinking about is the kind of online right-wing extremist communities that the shooter was floating in.

If perpetrators think that their communities won't approve of their violent actions then they're not going to want to do it as much anymore. And so, really trying to communicate to people that violence is not acceptable is going to be key, and that means actually making it not acceptable within those communities. When we've seen successful

community interventions, oftentimes it's been the case where people who are prone to violence are confronted by people in their community who are expressing to them that they don't approve of violence. And that really does have an effect.

Did your research find any potential tools to counteract these ideological ties that you say can lead to someone committing violence?

There are no easy answers here. If we wish to stop violence caused by misogyny and racism, then we have to destroy the culture of misogyny and racism that excuses, validates and valorizes violence. In some cases that may mean restricting communication channels so that these ideas don't have a place to fester. In other cases, it means having people that potential perpetrators respect talk to them about how these cultural values are wrong and will not be tolerated in the community. If we wish to end violence, then we have to actually make it morally unacceptable in our culture.

Provided by University of California - San Diego

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