

Police brutality in America

Part 2 in a series of articles on Amnesty International's report of human rights abuses in the US

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Amnesty International released its report 'United States of America--Rights for All' on October 6. The report paints a chilling picture of American society, including police brutality, abuse of children, prisoners, asylum-seekers and others, and the use of high-tech tools of repression and torture. Numerous violations of international standards of human rights are cited, as well as the role of the US in exporting weapons to governments known to carry out torture, and training the personnel to use these weapons. The report is the basis of a year-long campaign planned by the human rights group to bring US human rights violations to worldwide attention.

As part of a detailed examination of the Amnesty International report by the World Socialist Web Site, today's installment deals with the third chapter: 'Police Brutality: A pattern of abuse.'

According to Amnesty International: 'There is a widespread and persistent problem of police brutality across the USA. Thousands of individual complaints about police abuse are reported each year and local authorities pay out millions of dollars to victims in damages after lawsuits. Police officers have beaten and shot unresisting suspects; they have misused batons, chemical sprays and electro-shock weapons; they have injured or killed people by placing them in dangerous restraint holds.'

The report describes a situation in which police departments and their officers regularly abuse the rights of citizens, particularly in large urban areas. Ethnic and racial minorities--particularly young black and Hispanic males--are most frequently targeted, while the majority of police departments remain predominantly white.

The report cites a pattern of abuse in some of the country's largest police departments, including: New York City; Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, New Orleans, Chicago, Detroit and Atlanta.

Those guidelines which do exist to protect the public are systematically violated, with police using levels of violence

bearing no relation to the alleged threats they face. Some of the instances of brutality cited by Amnesty International include:

- * shooting of unarmed suspects fleeing from minor crime scenes;
- * instances when suspects held in custody are fired upon after already being apprehended or restrained;
- * car chases where vehicles are fired upon when drivers and occupants are unarmed;
- * unprovoked and unwarranted shootings during police stakeouts;
- * torture and ill-treatment inside police stations;
- * deaths while in police custody following dangerous restraint procedures, including the 'hogtie,' where the ankles are bound from behind to the wrists.

Excessive force has been used against mentally ill or disturbed people, who are engaged in nonthreatening behavior. In Fairfield, California in June 1996, James Parkinson, an unarmed, mentally ill man running naked around a swimming pool, died following being sprayed by police with pepper spray, hit with a taser gun and shackled face-down.

In many instances bystanders are the victims of police violence. In a 1996 report on the New York Police Department, Amnesty International cited cases where individuals had been assaulted for taking photographs at a crime scene or verbally criticizing police.

'Less-than-lethal' weapons

More than 60 people in the US have reportedly died in police custody where exposure to Oleoresin Capsicum (pepper) spray may have been a contributing factor. At least 3,000 police departments authorize the use of OC spray, an inflammatory agent derived from cayenne peppers. 'OC spray inflames the mucous membranes, causing closing of the eyes, coughing, gagging, shortness of breath and an

acute burning sensation on the skin and inside the nose and mouth,' according to Amnesty. In a well-publicized incident, sheriff's deputies applied OC spray into the eyes of nonresistant anti-logging demonstrators in Humboldt County, California in October 1997.

While stun guns have been banned for use by law enforcement agencies in Canada and most of Western Europe, their use is authorized in many US police departments. The report describes the use of this weapon: 'The stun gun is a hand-held device with two metal prongs that emit an electric shock. The taser is a hand-held device which shoots two barbed hooks into the subject's clothing from a distance; the current is transmitted through wires. In both cases a high voltage 'jolt', typically 50,000 volts, incapacitates the suspect.' Two people died in Pomona, California in 1996 after being shot with tasers by police.

Pattern of racial discrimination

The report maintains: 'Members of racial minorities bear the brunt of police brutality and excessive force in many parts of the USA.... Reported abuses include racist language, harassment, ill-treatment, unjustified stops and searches, unjustified shootings and false arrests.... The problems are not confined to inner cities.'

Black motorists are far more likely than whites to be stopped and searched without cause, and a significant number suffer injury at the hands of the police. In suburban Pittsburgh in 1995 black businessman Johnny Gammage died of suffocation while being detained by police officers after having been stopped for a traffic violation. This practice has become so well known that it is commonly referred to as the 'crime' of 'driving while black.'

William J. Whitfield 3rd, a black man living in New York City, was shot dead in a supermarket by police who claimed they mistook his keys for a gun. A deputy US Marshal shot and wounded 17-year-old Andre Burgess as he walked past an unmarked police car. The agent said he thought Burgess's candy bar was a weapon.

Young people, particularly minority youth, are seen by police as criminals because of the way they dress, because they frequent certain areas, or simply because of the color of their skin. An anti-loitering law introduced in Chicago in 1992 has resulted in the arrest of 41,000 youth, according to the Illinois American Civil Liberties Union.

Also the target of police violence are Hispanics living along the US-Mexican border, in particular in California and Texas. Native American people, both in cities and on reservations, have complained of police brutality as well as failure of authorities to respond to and prosecute crimes committed against Native Americans on reservations.

Gay men and lesbians report instances of harassment and brutality by police officers. They recount as well that reports of crimes against them are met in some instances with verbal or physical abuse by police.

A system that protects the abusers

Police officers and departments guilty of acts of brutality in most cases go unprosecuted and unpunished. Arrests and convictions of police officers for excessive force are extremely rare. While many cities pay out large sums to settle civil lawsuits, police departments and individual officers are rarely held accountable.

When officers are prosecuted, often it is the word of the victim against the accused, and sufficient evidence cannot be obtained unless other police officers come forward to testify.

A 'code of silence' operates in many in police departments, in which officers fail to report instances of brutality, or cover them up. The case of Abner Louima illustrates this phenomenon. The Haitian immigrant suffered serious internal injuries after New York police officers beat him, with one ramming the handle of a toilet plunger into his rectum. The report states: 'Out of nearly 100 officers interviewed during a federal investigation into the torture of Abner Louima (most of whom had been granted immunity from prosecution in return for giving evidence), only two reportedly provided investigators with information.'

Other barriers to prosecution of offending police officers include statutes of limitations on police disciplinary actions and secrecy surrounding police internal investigations.

The full text of the Amnesty International report can be accessed at: <http://www.rightsforall-usa.org/info/report/index.htm>

See Also:

US cited for widespread human rights abuses:

First in a series of articles on the Amnesty International report

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