FBI director says “viral videos” intimidating police in US

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In two recent speeches in Chicago, FBI Director James Comey has asserted that police anxiety in “the era of viral videos” is partially responsible for a rise in violent crime in many big US cities.

At a University of Chicago Law School forum Friday night, Comey asked, “In today’s YouTube world, are officers reluctant to get out of their cars and do the work that controls violent crime?”

He added, “I spoke to officers privately in one big city precinct who described being surrounded by young people with mobile phone cameras held high, taunting them the moment they get out of their cars. They told me, ‘We feel like we’re under siege and we don’t feel much like getting out of our cars.’”

In this speech and another Monday before the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), the FBI director painted a scenario in which police officers are being besieged by throngs of mostly black video-wielding thugs, who are preventing them from doing their work. He admitted that he had no data to back up his claim that this alleged phenomenon is responsible for an uptick in urban violence.

Comey argued before his audiences of police chiefs, future prosecutors and FBI agents: “We can’t lose sight of the fact that there really are bad people standing on the street with guns… They are being killed, police chiefs tell me, by other young men with guns.”

With these comments, the FBI director attempted to sidestep one inconvenient truth: The cell phone videos he finds so disruptive are catching the brutal and often murderous activity of police that is occurring with terrifying regularity in cities and towns across the United States. The clear implication of Comey’s reactionary remarks is that the actions of police should not be allowed to be recorded, giving them free rein to perpetrate their crimes without public knowledge and with total impunity.

There are no official government records of the number of people killed by police in the US. But one Wikipedia listing of killings by police officers—whether in the line of duty or not, and regardless of reason or method—places recent numbers at 337 killings in 2013, 623 in 2014, and 356 so far this year.

In his remarks on Friday, however, Comey chose to disregard these figures, focusing rather on his assertion that “Far more people are being killed in America’s cities this year than in many years. And let’s be clear: far more people of color are being killed in America’s cities this year… And it’s not the cops doing the killing.”

He added: “Most of America’s 50 largest cities have seen an increase in homicides and shootings this year, and many of them have seen a huge increase. These are cities with little in common except being American cities—places like Chicago, Tampa, Minneapolis, Sacramento, Orlando, Cleveland and Dallas.”

The Obama administration and the Justice Department have disputed that the rise in violent crime this year is statistically significant. But the FBI director seizes upon it to encourage police departments across the country to step up their repressive actions.

“I do have a strong sense,” he said, “that some part of the explanation is a chill wind blowing through American law enforcement over the last year. And that wind is surely changing behavior.”

Some have dubbed this the “Ferguson effect,” in reference to the protests that erupted last year in Ferguson, Missouri in response to the police killing of Michael Brown, a young unarmed African-American. The vitriol of Comey is directed as much toward the protesters against police violence as toward its victims.

Comey is not alone. New York City Police Chief Bill

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Bratton prefers to call the supposedly baneful impact on police the "YouTube effect."

The Democratic mayor of Chicago, Rahm Emanuel, President Barack Obama's former White House chief of staff, speaking at a gathering of top police officials in early October complained that officers have backed down from situations for fear of generating negative media coverage. He said, "We have allowed our police department to get fetal and it is having a direct consequence." He added, "They have pulled back from the ability to interdict… they don't want to be a news story themselves, they don't want their career ended early, and it is having an impact."

On Monday, White House Press Secretary Josh Earnest tried to distance the Obama administration from the FBI director's comments. "The evidence we have seen so far doesn't support the contention that law enforcement officials are shirking their responsibilities," Earnest said. "In fact, you hear law enforcement leaders across the country indicating that that's not what's taking place."

However, in a speech Tuesday to the same police chiefs' gathering addressed by Comey the previous day, Obama made no mention of the FBI director's statements. Obama was well aware that his silence would be taken by police departments around the country as a tacit endorsement of their brutal methods.

In remarks replete with platitudes about the necessity for "communities of color" to bond with the police forces sent to repress them—and the necessity to "restore trust between law enforcement and the citizens they protect"—the president declared that police officers often "get scapegoated for the failings of society and our criminal justice system."

Addressing the police chiefs, Obama said: "The media focuses on the sensational and controversial. And with today's technology, if just one of your officers does something irresponsible, the whole world knows about it moments later."

Reflecting nervousness in ruling circles about the growth of opposition to police violence, he added, "The tensions in some cities—the feeling that law enforcement isn't always applied fairly—those sentiments don't just come out of nowhere."

No, the growth of police violence comes in response to the growth of popular anger over ever-increasing social inequality. Comey's remarks make clear that, no matter how many police killings are exposed and documented, the reign of police violence and terror in cites and towns across the country will continue unabated.

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