

Study sheds light on massive police violence in Germany

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Shoving, fist strikes and painful pressure points, shackling and restraining, twisting joint and limbs, choking and kicking, attacks with tasers or pepper spray, use of police dogs and water cannons—the list of methods by which the police in Germany assault and maltreat their victims is long. As if that were not enough, victims are also faced with the fact that police esprit de corps and closeness to the judiciary practically prevent these offenses from being prosecuted and punished.

These are the findings of a large-scale study presented by criminologist Tobias Singelstein and his team at Goethe University in Frankfurt in early May. The document, “Violence in Service. Excessive use of force by police and its processing” (*Gewalt im Amt. Übermäßige polizeiliche Gewaltanwendung und ihre Aufarbeitung*) can be downloaded free of charge from the university’s publishing house. Its contents document not only the frightening extent of police violence, but also that such violence remains virtually without consequences for the perpetrators.

The study, which was supported by the German Research Foundation (Deutschen Forschungsgemeinschaft, DFG), was obviously prompted by the broad public debate on police violence unleashed at the G20 summit in Hamburg. Under then First Mayor of Hamburg and now German Chancellor Olaf Scholz (Social Democrats, SPD), a state of siege was imposed on the city and unrestrained police violence was unleashed against protesters and uninvolved bystanders.

Singelstein cites the Hamburg G20 summit in the introduction as a “prominent example of the lack of a reappraisal of excessive police violence.” In addition, he refers to the case of 16-year-old Senegalese Mohamed Lamine Dramé, whom Dortmund police officers killed with multiple shots from an automatic gun, as well as other cases. These instances have triggered a still-unresolved controversy about the use of violent force. In fact, Dramé’s murder in Dortmund was just one of four police killings in a single week.

The results of the latest study now show that excessive—and unpunished—use of force is part of everyday life for police. By contrast, the conclusions Professor Singelstein draws from his own research findings are rather toothless: he recommends respecting the independent judiciary, as well as the introduction of individual identification and body cams among police in all German states.

Yet the larger context is obvious: the increasingly brutal police excesses and their acceptance by the capitalist state and its parties can only be understood as a response to a new upsurge in class struggle. Dissatisfaction with the ruling coalition government in Berlin, which is ever more openly committed to war and social inequality, inevitably invokes social resistance. With no established party representing the

interests of the broad population, the state is resorting ever more directly to its organs of violence—to the police, the judiciary and the armed forces—to defend the narrow stratum of the wealthy upper echelons against the working class.

A similar situation presently exists in France, where the state organs are applying hard power against protesters on an almost daily basis, or in the United States, where fatal police shootings now occur several times a day. In Germany, too, the extent of police violence now documented by the “Violence in Service” study can only be understood in this context.

According to Professor Singelstein’s team, this is the first time that “a large-scale quantitative survey of victims of police violence” has been conducted in Germany. Using trust-building intermediaries (“gatekeepers”), the authors located nearly 6,000 people from hard-to-reach, vulnerable or stigmatized groups and interviewed in detail 3,373 of them who had definitely been affected by police violence. Subsequently, 63 interviewees from the police, judiciary and public prosecutor’s office, as well as lawyers and victim counselors had their say. After five years of research, the results of the analysis are now available.

Its content is shocking. For example, 19 percent of all interviewees reported serious injuries, such as to joints, sensory organs, and broken bones. In the case of police operations outside major events, one in four (25 percent) was similarly affected. The risk of serious injuries was especially high in cases when choking and restraints were employed. Violence in police custody was also frequently reported.

The team divided those affected into three broad categories: first, demonstrations and large events of a political nature (55 percent); second, soccer and other mass events (25 percent); and third, conflicts during ID checks and similar situations outside of large events (20 percent).

Only 16 percent of participants were found to have an immigrant background, which is a lower proportion than in the population as a whole. The largest proportion with an immigrant background and of People of Color (PoC) showed up in conflicts that occurred outside of major events: in and around traffic stops, operations against third parties, apartment and house searches, deportations, etc.

The research team acknowledged a large unknown in the area of deportations. Here, it only had practical access to indirect reports, which came from interviews with lawyers and counseling centers, since those directly affected could hardly be reached for the study.

The employee of a counseling center said: “Most of all, we have to deal with police violence during deportations, and there it is specifically about sedation, shackling, humiliation, beatings and (...) simply degrading behavior, degrading behavior by police officers,

etc.”

The brutality of the crackdown is underscored by a report in which an eyewitness attempted to film police violence with a cell phone. It was the case

... of a Syrian refugee who filmed an arrest of an African man because the officers sat on the latter’s back. And the arrested man was screaming, he can’t breathe, he can’t breathe, and the officers kept going anyway. And then he filmed it ... and then they broke his arm, so to speak, a spiral fracture, so that he would drop the cell phone. And to this day—that was a year ago—and to this day he still has pain. And the [proceedings] were discontinued, even though there were witnesses, and he was charged with committing bodily harm.

The police often deal with mentally disturbed people in an unnecessarily violent manner. There is strong prejudice against the “three Bs:” “drunk, crazy, stoned,” (“betrunken, bekloppt, bekifft”) as one police officer admitted in an interview. This greatly lowers the inhibition threshold, the people concerned are informally addressed (the German language has a informal and formal pronouns) and they are often arbitrarily injured (since people who are drunk or on drugs are supposedly “less sensitive to pain”).

Elsewhere, a police officer admits in an interview that “Japanese massage sticks” of his own making circulated among his colleagues. They would be attached to a small ribbon in the sleeve and could be used in unobserved moments to inflict great pain on the victims in certain parts of the body.

Not only is the study frightening, equally frightening is the way major daily newspapers have reacted to it. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* interviewed, of all people, the notoriously right-wing police ideologue Rainer Wendt, chairman of the reactionary professional association Deutsche Polizeigewerkschaft (DPoIG), about its contents. He claimed: “There is no structural problem with the use of force by the police.”

Wendt described the demand for mandatory individual identification of police officers as a “political fighting instrument of left-wing parties to publicly discredit the police and to place its officers under general suspicion of unlawful use of force.”

Wendt’s brash assertion that the accusations against police officers are baseless and unfounded are based on the disastrous practice of the German judiciary and prosecutors’ offices, which hardly ever bring charges—as rare as they are—to trial and even more rarely convict the accused. This exactly was a stated goal of the study: to highlight those many cases that are never tried in court.

The results of the study are clear: although cases of assault by officers are on the rise, it is extremely rare for them to be reported to the police. The overwhelming majority of respondents chose not to press charges because they assumed they would be unsuccessful. In most cases, they were unable to identify the police perpetrators. In addition, there was also a justified fear that the accused police officers would file a counter complaint.

Less than 10 percent (9.2 percent) of the respondents indicated they had filed a complaint, most with the intention that “something like this does not happen again.” Of the small number of cases that were reported at all, the vast majority were dropped due to “insignificance” or “lack of sufficient suspicion.”

For comparison, the study cites statistics from 2021, when only 2.3 percent of charges of unlawful use of force by police officers were tried and nearly 98 percent were dropped. And of the 80 accused police officers who actually went to trial in a capital case in 2021, only one in three (27 people) ended up being convicted—a proportion far below the average.

Singelstein admitted that these results had ultimately surprised even him, the expert: “How small, after all, the power of complaint of those affected is, and how great, in contrast, the power of definition of the police.”

The study expresses relatively clearly that it is essentially class issues that trigger police violence. Those targeted are primarily people who are at the bottom of the social ladder and have no lobby. One lawyer is quoted as saying:

I think that the more marginal the milieu of the accused, the more likely it is that the police will act more harshly if something escalates, right? ... But this is a purely emotional thing—that foreigners, asylum seekers, so to speak, are not in the sense of ... There are also many German Turks here, ... they are German citizens. But just from their ethnic origin I think they run the risk of being tackled harder.

In the case of demonstrations, the main factor (80 percent) cited for excessively violent police treatment is “political orientation.” For events outside of large-scale demonstrations, political orientation ranks second for use of force at over 40 percent, ahead of factors such as age, gender or ethnicity. Almost all those reporting police violence in the context of a demonstration or political action described themselves as “tending left-wing.”

Groups of people who are perceived as “socioeconomically worse off” and for whom “no legal resistance can be expected” are particularly frequently targeted by the police. According to the study, this affects “marginalized groups such as racialized persons, LGBTIQ persons, homeless or other subaltern groups,” as well as People of Color (PoC). In it, the mention of “homeless” and “subalterns” in particular points to the class issues at stake: members of the working class, whether as professionals, unemployed or refugees, are particularly likely to be victims of police violence.

An interview with a police officer documents the far-right sentiment and militaristic language that circulates among police forces:

Well, it just depends on what the order is at the moment. If there’s a high threshold for intervention, then you let yourself be spat on for two hours and then all of a sudden they say, “Now you can proceed!”—and then Poland is open.



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