

Memphis and Racist Policing

February 2, 2023 by [Wornie Reed](#)

The recent horrible policing killing in Memphis reminds me of a sad part of my youth. As a teenager in Alabama, I studiously avoided police officers, because I had this morbid mindset concerning them.

I was resolved with every fiber of my being that if an officer hit me, he had effectively killed two people—him and me. I would kill him, and I would be executed. I was a good boy, a Sunday School kid. But no matter how hard I tried I could not rid myself of that attitude.

This orientation was not the result of something any police officer had done to me. It was my knowledge of how policemen regularly beat up African Americans.

I worked hard psychologically to rid myself of this morbid orientation, saying to myself that I should not willingly die over that issue, but feeling that way was a long time coming. I was around 30 years of age before I successfully eliminated that frame of mind about police officers.

Until that time, I could not bring myself to socialize with any policeman, not even a Black one. In fact, I had little if any respect for Black policemen. In many places in the 1940s and 1950s, and into the 1960s, even in northern cities, Black officers could arrest Black people, but not Whites. I had contempt for anyone who would accept such a job, thinking that I would rather starve to death. And to make matters worse, whether they could arrest White people or not, many Black officers took their role of policing the Black Community to the extreme.

Please note that traditionally police treat Black and White communities differently. They *protect* White communities and *police* Black communities. Policing Black communities means managing the residents and keeping them in line. This is not a friendly relationship. Rather, it is antagonistic. It seemed that a perceived necessary situation is to have Black community members afraid of the police.

When Blacks became members of police forces, they were often assigned to Black communities to do the “policing.” Of course, the practice of policing Black communities is racist. And it is still racist when Black officers are used to carry out these activities. In the past, many of them have gone wild in doing so. In many American cities Black officers beat up Black men so often that some of them acquired well-known nicknames in Black communities. Memphis was one such city.

Police departments have always had hostile relationships with Black communities, having grown out of the slave patrols which among other things captured and punished

runaway slaves. So, they started with a harsh approach to Black folks, something that has continued through time.

The policies and practices of police departments have always tended to be racist, with a few in recent years becoming exceptions. Long ago, a policing culture developed around the policies and practices of this institution, and officers are part of that culture. If these policies and practices are oriented in a negative way towards African Americans, it is racist. Thus, it is systemic racism.

Black police officers operate in this policing culture of systemic racism. And sometimes they carry out acts against African Americans, like the old days of the 1940s and 1950s

.If you think this is a new and much better era, please realize that there has never been any real reform of policing, especially as it pertains to African Americans. Also, things may be worse than back in the 1950s because of the beginning of the militarization of the police in the late 1960s.

One of the reasons police keep using excessive force is because they get away with it regularly. Memphis situations will continue to occur with Black as well as White police officers until structural changes are made, changes like demilitarizing police forces and changing laws and regulations that shield police officers from prosecution.