

AN ANALYSIS OF POLICE BRUTALITY COMPLAINTS
REPORTED TO THE
DETROIT BRANCH NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED
PEOPLE

IN THE PERIOD FROM JUNE 1, 1956 TO JULY 30, 1957

In August of 1957 the Detroit Branch NAACP began an analysis of police brutality complaints which were reported to the Branch office in the period, **January**. 1, 1956 to July 30, 1957. The analysis covered a total of 103 cases and was completed in October, 1957.

The principal objective of the NAACP in making this study was to illuminate some of the basic problems in the area of police-community relations and to find what other common factors that might emerge. The results, it was felt, could be used in a further effort to inform the public and the appropriate public officials on the extent of the problem of police brutality in the community and some of the factors contributing to it. Such information should also be helpful in bringing about some of the desired corrective measures in police methods and a better climate of goodwill between law enforcement officials and the community.

For the purposes of this inquiry, ten questions were asked which the Branch staff believed would provide the necessary control for securing the information desired. On the pages that follow the questions and their findings are presented in consecutive order.

ANALYSIS OF POLICE BRUTALITY COMPLAINTS

1. Average number of complaints reported to the NAACP each month.

There is an average of 3 and 1/3 complaints per month of police brutality. Our records show that anywhere from 1 to 9 complaints are filed with the NAACP during the period of a month, with the largest number of complaints being recorded in July of each year.

2. Most frequent type of police misconduct in these complaints.

The most frequent type of police misconduct involved in these complaints is physical assault, followed by insulting epithets:

- a) The common use of profanity and the reference to the complainant's race in a derogatory manner.
- b) The indiscriminate searching of citizens' pockets and wallets on public streets.
- c) When citizens question the violation of their rights the officers resort to physical assault, followed by arrest.

3. Rank order of the various types of police misconduct involved in these complaints.

Our reports show that out of 103 cases, 33 were physical assault, and 23 were cases of both physical and verbal assault. Our reports show 12 cases of insulting epithets used by arresting officers, and 12 cases of illegal search of home or car, and 4 cases of false arrest.

- a) In 19 of these assault cases, victims were held without charge (usually overnight) and released. 3 were dismissed in court for lack of evidence.
- b) Women were the victims of 18 of these assault cases.
- c) One case involved a 16 year old boy.

d) Our files show an additional 8 cases of threats and intimidation on the part of police officers.

4. The central problem involved in the attitude of the complainants.
The central problem involved in the attitude of the complainants seems to be the unprovoked attack by the police while questioning them. This, followed by false charges of "resisting arrest" has created distrust and bitter resentment of the police department on the part of the complainants.

5. Do the attitudes of the complainants toward the police reflect any common factors or prejudices of interest to this inquiry?
Our reports show that 90% of the complainants are working people without a previous police record, who believe they are subjected to unwarranted abuse because of their race. They feel that their freedom and well-being is in constant jeopardy since they are exposed to the sadist whims of race-baiting police officers. This is evident by the similarity in the complaints where the officer is quoted as demanding that the complainant say "Yes sir and no sir when answering a white man", or "I can see you are one of those smart niggers."

6. Do the attitudes of policemen toward complainants reflect any common factors or prejudices of interest to this inquiry?
Our reports show a total disregard, on the part of policemen, for the complainant's rights as a citizen in every case recorded.

Example:

- 1) Searching of citizens in public streets for minor traffic violations.
- 2) Physical assault.
- 3) The common use of racial slurs.

- 4) The common practice of assault and arrest of those friends or relatives who attempt to intervene on behalf of the person being attacked by the police.
- 5) Abuse of complainants in police precincts.
- 6) The search and destruction of property, without a warrant, in citizens' homes.
- 7) The use of profanity in the presence of women.
- 8) The prevalent indication that the complainant has no rights that he (the police officer) has to respect.
- 9) The intimidation and abuse of interracial couples, while expressing their opposition to mixed personal associations.
- 10) Assumption that complainants are guilty of some crime, if not, they should be, without any evidence.
- 11) Hostile references to the NAACP in an effort to intimidate complainants.
- 12) The indiscreet and common practice of stopping women on the street and accusing them of prostitution or of writing numbers.

7. Do the complaints show that any particular police precinct stations are involved more often than others?

Our records show that out of 98 complaints, 23 were made against officers from the Woodward Station; 15 against officers from the Vernor Station; 13 against officers from the Petoskey Station and 12 against officers from the Hunt Street Station. This shows a total of 63 complaints against the officers of these four precincts, which is 64% of the complaints of the entire 15 precincts.

8. What conclusions can be drawn from the Branch records regarding the official attitude of the police department to the complainants reported by the NAACP?

The most significant official attitude of the police department is the reluctance to take stern disciplinary measures in dealing with officers who have exceeded their authority.

- 1) The attempt, by the Department, to defend the behavior of the police officers even when there is reasonable doubt of their innocence.
- 2) The failure of the Department to curtail the practice of strong-arm methods in making arrests.
- 3) The failure to replace those officers who bully underprivileged and unpopular elements of the community; who think their badge gives them authority to judge and punish a suspect, and who do not hesitate to enforce not only the "law" but their own prejudices as well.
- 4) Criticism of the NAACP and other community leadership, by the Department, for not being "cooperative" when they point out existing police brutality, and the danger of this practice if it is not corrected. An example of this is the statement made by the Police Commissioner in defense of police officers who were unduly violent in dispersing a crowd of people who had gathered on the street to hear a group of speakers from the Muhammad Temple. In a statement to the press the commissioner said: "The officers are to be highly commended for their alertness and patience in preventing what might have been a much more serious incident. A minimum of force was used and only the perpe-

trators were apprehended. The assembly was not only unlawful, but constituted a breach of the peace." This statement was made after receiving protest from Arthur L. Johnson, Executive Secretary of the Detroit Branch N.A.A.C.P., who arrived on the scene along with Congressman Charles C. Diggs, Jr. a few minutes after it began. Another example of the official attitude of the police department was the failure to acknowledge a complaint where the complainant, a Mr. Marvin Pettit of 3529 Nottingham, reported that an officer requested his signature on a petition for Mayor Orville Hubbard on the basis that Mayor Hubbard "is against Colored people". Despite the fact that a letter urging that this matter be looked into and the offending officer be dealt with accordingly, no disposition of this case was reported to the Branch.

9. What are the strong points as indicated by the records in the Branch approach to the police-community relations problem?

The most salient strong points, gathered from the records, in the Branch approach is an unbiased attempt to get the facts in each case reported, and to make a sober assessment of the problem, followed by requesting the Police Commissioner to investigate thoroughly each complaint, and insisting upon impartial redress. Our records show a continuous effort on the part of the Branch to get the Police Commissioner and Department officials to understand the importance of good Police-community relations for sound law enforcement.

These efforts are:

- 1) Letters pointing out the appalling abuse of Civil Rights

by some members of the police department.

- 2) Letters expressing the Branch's support and appreciation when the Department indicates an interest in taking steps to improve police-community relations.
- 3) Requesting periodic reports of progress the Department is making in adjusting brutality complaints and the proposed disposition of these complaints.
- 4) Making periodic recommendations to the Department in an effort to help establish a better climate of police-community relations.

10. What are the weak points as indicated by the records in the Branch approach to the police-community relations problem?

The weak points indicated by the records are:

- 1) The lack of an opportunity to examine the claims of both sides in complaints made to the police department, including:
 - a) The record of police officers accused by the complainants.
 - b) The number of complaints made by Negro citizens against these officers.
 - c) The number of complaints made by white citizens against these officers.
 - d) The common reasons for arrest of the complainants by these officers?
 - e) The common reasons for arrest of white persons by these officers?

In summarizing what has been indicated by the records I would like to point out that the victims of these assaults, for the most part, are working people without any previous police record. The records also show that the complainants live in various sections of the city rather than in a supposedly 'crime area'. This seems to suggest that the manhandling and 3rd degree methods revealed in these cases is unnecessary and reflects the need for a thorough and impartial investigation of police methods in this city, if the Department is to have the confidence and respect of law-abiding citizens. As indicated by these reports, this is a grave situation but it can be corrected if those responsible for law enforcement are willing to take an unbiased "look" and recognize that something must be done to create in the community an atmosphere for cooperation, and respect for the individual.

The following suggestions might help to establish good police-community relations:

- 1) Increase the number of Negro policemen at all levels in the department by a completely "open" hiring policy.
- 2) Integrate the police (Mixed details).
- 3) Conduct human relations programs in the neighborhoods surrounding each precinct. This program should place special emphasis on courtesy by the police and respect for the police by the Citizen.
- 4) Organizing of a representative interracial citizens group to make a survey of the police department and recommend improvements based on their findings. This survey should be as much in the interest of favorable working conditions

for the police as in the civil rights of the citizens.

This group should publicize the achievements of the police department in an effort to establish pride in their work and at the same time build respect for intelligent law enforcement.

- 5) Investigation of police brutality complaints by an independent, representative committee, so as to avoid the hazards and pitfalls of the Department investigating itself - an inherently wrong procedure.