

Confessions Of A Former Bastard Cop

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I was a police officer for nearly ten years and I was a bastard. We all were.

This essay has been kicking around in my head for years now and I've never felt confident enough to write it. It's a time in my life I'm ashamed of. It's a time that I hurt people and, through inaction, allowed others to be hurt. It's a time that I acted as a violent agent of capitalism and white supremacy. Under the guise of public safety, I personally ruined people's lives but in so doing, made the public no safer... so did the family members and close friends of mine who also bore the badge alongside me.

But enough is enough.

The reforms aren't working. Incrementalism isn't happening. Unarmed Black, indigenous, and people of color are being killed by cops in the streets and the police are savagely attacking the people protesting these murders.

American policing is a thick blue tumor strangling the life from our communities and if you don't believe it when the poor and the marginalized say it, if you don't believe it when you see cops across the country shooting journalists with less-lethal bullets and caustic chemicals, maybe you'll believe it when you hear it straight from the pig's mouth.

WHY AM I WRITING THIS

As someone who went through the training, hiring, and socialization of a career in law enforcement, I wanted to give a first-hand account of why I believe police officers are the way they are. Not to excuse their behavior, but to explain it and to **indict** the structures that perpetuate it.

I believe that if everyone understood how we're trained and brought up in the profession, it would inform the demands our communities should be making of a new way of community safety. If I tell you how we were made, I hope it will empower you to unmake us.

One of the other reasons I've struggled to write this essay is that I don't want to center the conversation on myself and my big salty boo-hoo feelings about my bad choices. It's a toxic white impulse to see atrocities and think "How can I make this about me?" So, I hope you'll take me at my word that this account isn't meant to highlight me, but rather the hundred thousand of me in every city in the country. It's about the structure that made me (that I chose to pollute myself with) and it's my meager contribution to the cause of radical justice.

YES, ALL COPS ARE BASTARDS

I was a police officer in a major metropolitan area in California with a predominantly poor, non-white population (with a large proportion of first-generation immigrants). One night during briefing, our watch commander told us that the city council had requested a new zero tolerance policy. Against murderers, drug dealers, or child predators?

No, against homeless people collecting cans from recycling bins.

See, the city had some kickback deal with the waste management company where waste management got paid by the government for our expected tonnage of recycling. When homeless people "stole" that recycling from the waste management company, they were putting that cheaper contract in peril. So, we were to arrest as many recyclers as we could find.

Even for me, this was a stupid policy and I promptly blew Sarge off. But a few hours later, Sarge called me over to assist him. He was detaining a 70 year old immigrant who spoke no

English, who he'd seen picking a coke can out of a trash bin. He ordered me to arrest her for stealing trash. I said, "Sarge, c'mon, she's an old lady." He said, "I don't give a shit. Hook her up, that's an order." And... I did. She cried the entire way to the station and all through the booking process. I couldn't even comfort her because I didn't speak Spanish. I felt disgusting but I was ordered to make this arrest and I wasn't willing to lose my job for her.

If you're tempted to feel sympathy for me, don't. I used to happily hassle the homeless under other circumstances. I researched obscure penal codes so I could arrest people in homeless encampments for lesser known crimes like "remaining too close to railroad property" (369i of the California Penal Code). I used to call it "planting warrant seeds" since I knew they wouldn't make their court dates and we could arrest them again and again for warrant violations.

We used to have informal contests for who could cite or arrest someone for the weirdest law. DUI on a bicycle, non-regulation number of brooms on your tow truck (27700(a)(1) of the California Vehicle Code)... shit like that. For me, police work was a logic puzzle for arresting people, regardless of their actual threat to the community. As ashamed as I am to admit it, it needs to be said: stripping people of their freedom felt like a game to me for many years.

I know what you're going to ask: did I ever plant drugs? Did I ever plant a gun on someone? Did I ever make a false arrest or file a false report? Believe it or not, the answer is no. Cheating was no fun, I liked to get my stats the "legitimate" way. But I knew officers who kept a little baggie of whatever or maybe a pocket knife that was a little too big in their war bags (yeah, we called our dufflebags "war bags"...). Did I ever tell anybody about it? No I did not. Did I ever confess my suspicions when cocaine suddenly showed up in a gang member's jacket? No I did not.

In fact, let me tell you about an extremely formative experience: in my police academy class, we had a clique of around six trainees who routinely bullied and harassed other students: intentionally scuffing another trainee's shoes to get them in trouble during inspection, sexually harassing female trainees, cracking racist jokes, and so on. Every quarter, we were to write anonymous evaluations of our squadmates. I wrote scathing accounts of their behavior, thinking I was helping keep bad apples out of law enforcement and believing I would be protected. Instead, the academy staff read my complaints to them out loud and outed me to them and never punished them, causing me to get harassed for the rest of my academy class. That's how I learned that even police leadership hates rats. That's why no one is "changing things from the inside." They can't, the structure won't allow it.

And that's the point of what I'm telling you. Whether you were my sergeant, legally harassing an old woman, me, legally harassing our residents, my fellow trainees bullying the rest of us, or "the bad apples" illegally harassing "shitbags", we were all in it together. I knew cops that pulled women over to flirt with them. I knew cops who would pepper spray sleeping bags so that homeless people would have to throw them away. I knew cops that intentionally provoked anger in suspects so they could claim they were assaulted. I was particularly good at winding people up verbally until they lashed out so I could fight them. Nobody spoke out. Nobody stood up. Nobody betrayed the code.

None of us protected the people (you) from bad cops.

This is why "All cops are bastards." Even your uncle, even your cousin, even your mom, even your brother, even your best friend, even your spouse, even me. Because even if they wouldn't Do The Thing themselves, they will almost never rat out another officer who Does The Thing, much less stop it from happening.

BASTARD 101

I could write an entire book of the awful things I've done, seen done, and heard others bragging about doing. But, to me, the bigger question is "How did it get this way?". While I was a police officer in a city 30 miles from where I lived, many of my fellow officers were from the community and treated their neighbors just as badly as I did. While every cop's individual biases come into play, it's the profession itself that is toxic, and it starts from day 1 of training.

Every police academy is different but all of them share certain features: taught by old cops, run like a paramilitary bootcamp, strong emphasis on protecting yourself more than anyone else. The majority of my time in the academy was spent doing aggressive physical training and watching video after video after video of police officers being murdered on duty.

I want to highlight this: nearly everyone coming into law enforcement is bombarded with dash cam footage of police officers being ambushed and killed. Over and over and over. Colorless VHS mortality plays, cops screaming for help over their radios, their bodies going limp as a pair of tail lights speed away into a grainy black horizon. In my case, with commentary from an old racist cop who used to brag about assaulting Black Panthers.

To understand why all cops are bastards, you need to understand one of the things almost every training officer told me when it came to using force:

"I'd rather be judged by 12 than carried by 6."

Meaning, "I'll take my chances in court rather than risk getting hurt". We're able to think that way because police unions are extremely overpowered and because of the generous concept of Qualified Immunity, a legal theory which says a cop generally can't be held personally liable for mistakes they make doing their job in an official capacity.

When you look at the actions of the officers who killed George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, David McAtee, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, or Freddie Gray, remember that they, like me, were trained to recite "I'd rather be judged by 12" as a mantra. Even if Mistakes Were Made™, the city (meaning the taxpayers, meaning you) pays the settlement, not the officer.

Once police training has - through repetition, indoctrination, and violent spectacle - promised officers that everyone in the world is out to kill them, the next lesson is that your partners are the only people protecting you. Occasionally, this is even true: I've had encounters turn on me rapidly to the point I legitimately thought I was going to die, only to have other officers come and turn the tables.

One of the most important thought leaders in law enforcement is Col. Dave Grossman, a "killologist" who wrote an essay called "Sheep, Wolves, and Sheepdogs". Cops are the sheepdogs, bad guys are the wolves, and the citizens are the sheep (!). Col. Grossman makes sure to mention that to a stupid sheep, sheepdogs look more like wolves than sheep, and that's why they dislike you.

This "they hate you for protecting them and only I love you, only I can protect you" tactic is familiar to students of abuse. It's what abusers do to coerce their victims into isolation, pulling them away from friends and family and ensnaring them in the abuser's toxic web. Law enforcement does this too, pitting the officer against civilians. "They don't understand what you do, they don't respect your sacrifice, they just want to get away with crimes. You're only safe with us."

I think the Wolves vs. Sheepdogs dynamic is one of the most important elements as to why officers behave the way they do. Every single second of my training, I was told that criminals

were not a legitimate part of their community, that they were individual bad actors, and that their bad actions were solely the result of their inherent criminality. Any concept of systemic trauma, generational poverty, or white supremacist oppression was either never mentioned or simply dismissed. After all, most people don't steal, so anyone who does isn't "most people," right? To us, anyone committing a crime deserved anything that happened to them because they broke the "social contract." And yet, it was never even a question as to whether the power structure above them was honoring any sort of contract back.

Understand: Police officers are part of the state monopoly on violence and all police training reinforces this monopoly as a cornerstone of police work, a source of honor and pride. **Many cops fantasize about getting to kill someone in the line of duty**, egged on by others that have. One of my training officers told me about the time he shot and killed a mentally ill homeless man wielding a big stick. He bragged that he "slept like a baby" that night. Official training teaches you how to be violent effectively and when you're legally allowed to deploy that violence, but "unofficial training" teaches you to **desire** violence, to expand the breadth of your violence without getting caught, and to erode your own compassion for desperate people so you can justify punitive violence against them.

HOW TO BE A BASTARD

I have participated in some of these activities personally, others are ones I either witnessed personally or heard officers brag about openly. Very, very occasionally, I knew an officer who was disciplined or fired for one of these things.

Police officers will lie about the law, about what's illegal, or about what they can legally do to you in order to manipulate you into doing what they want.

Police officers will lie about feeling afraid for their life to justify a use of force after the fact.

Police officers will lie and tell you they'll file a police report just to get you off their back. Police officers will lie that your cooperation will "look good for you" in court, or that they will "put in a good word for you with the DA." The police will never help you look good in court.

Police officers will lie about what they see and hear to access private property to conduct unlawful searches.

Police officers will lie and say your friend already ratted you out, so you might as well rat them back out. This is almost never true.

Police officers will lie and say you're not in trouble in order to get you to exit a location or otherwise make an arrest more convenient for them.

Police officers will lie and say that they won't arrest you if you'll just "be honest with them" so they know what really happened.

Police officers will lie about their ability to seize the property of friends and family members to coerce a confession.

Police officers will write obviously bullshit tickets so that they get time-and-a-half overtime fighting them in court.

Police officers will search places and containers you didn't consent to and later claim they were open or "smelled like marijuana".

Police officers will threaten you with a more serious crime they can't prove in order to convince you to confess to the lesser crime they really want you for.

Police officers will employ zero tolerance on races and ethnicities they dislike and show favor and lenience to members of their own group.

Police officers will use intentionally extra-painful maneuvers and holds during an arrest to provoke “resistance” so they can further assault the suspect.

Some police officers will plant drugs and weapons on you, sometimes to teach you a lesson, sometimes if they kill you somewhere away from public view.

Some police officers will assault you to intimidate you and threaten to arrest you if you tell anyone.

Anon-trivial number of police officers will steal from your house or vehicle during a search.

Anon-trivial number of police officers commit intimate partner violence and use their status to get away with it.

Anon-trivial number of police officers use their position to entice, coerce, or force sexual favors from vulnerable people.

If you take nothing else away from this essay, I want you to tattoo this onto your brain forever: if a police officer is telling you something, it is probably a lie designed to gain your compliance.

Do not talk to cops and never, ever believe them. Do not “try to be helpful” with cops. Do not assume they are trying to catch someone else instead of you. Do not assume what they are doing is “important” or even legal. Under no circumstances assume any police officer is acting in good faith.

Also, and this is important, do not talk to cops.

I just remembered something, **do not talk to cops.**

Checking my notes real quick, something jumped out at me:

Do
not
fucking
talk
to
cops.
Ever.

Say, “I don’t answer questions,” and ask if you’re free to leave; if so, leave. If not, tell them you want your lawyer and that, per the Supreme Court, they must terminate questioning. If they don’t, file a complaint and collect some badges for your mantle.

DO THE BASTARDS EVER HELP?

Reading the above, you may be tempted to ask whether cops ever do anything good. And the answer is, sure, sometimes. In fact, most officers I worked with thought they were usually helping the helpless and protecting the safety of innocent people.

During my tenure in law enforcement, I protected women from domestic abusers, arrested cold-blooded murderers and child molesters, and comforted families who lost children to car accidents and other tragedies. I helped connect struggling people in my community with local resources for food, shelter, and counseling. I deescalated situations that could have turned violent and talked a lot of people down from making the biggest mistake of their lives. I worked with

plenty of officers who were individually kind, bought food for homeless residents, or otherwise showed care for their community.

The question is this: did I need a gun and sweeping police powers to help the average person on the average night? The answer is no. When I was doing my best work as a cop, I was doing mediocre work as a therapist or a social worker. My good deeds were listening to people failed by the system and trying to unite them with any crumbs of resources the structure was currently denying them.

It's also important to note that well over 90% of the calls for service I handled were reactive, showing up well after a crime had taken place. We would arrive, take a statement, collect evidence (if any), file the report, and onto the next caper. Most "active" crimes we stopped were someone harmless possessing or selling a small amount of drugs. Very, very rarely would we stop something dangerous in progress or stop something from happening entirely. The closest we could usually get was seeing someone running away from the scene of a crime, but the damage was still done.

And consider this: my job as a police officer required me to be a marriage counselor, a mental health crisis professional, a conflict negotiator, a social worker, a child advocate, a traffic safety expert, a sexual assault specialist, and, every once in awhile, a public safety officer authorized to use force, all after only a 1000 hours of training at a police academy. Does the person we send to catch a robber also need to be the person we send to interview a rape victim or document a fender bender? Should one profession be expected to do all that important community care (with very little training) all at the same time?

To put this another way: I made double the salary most social workers made to do a fraction of what they could do to mitigate the **causes** of crimes and desperation. I can count very few times my monopoly on state violence actually made our citizens safer, and even then, it's hard to say better-funded social safety nets and dozens of other community care specialists wouldn't have prevented a problem before it started.

Armed, indoctrinated (and dare I say, traumatized) cops do not make you safer; community mutual aid networks who can unite other people with the resources they need to stay fed, clothed, and housed make you safer. I really want to hammer this home: every cop in your neighborhood is damaged by their training, emboldened by their immunity, and they have a gun and the ability to take your life with near-impunity. **This does not make you safer, even if you're white.**

HOW DO YOU SOLVE A PROBLEM LIKE A BASTARD?

So what do we do about it? Even though I'm an expert on bastardism, I am not a public policy expert nor an expert in organizing a post-police society. So, before I give some suggestions, let me tell you what probably won't solve the problem of bastard cops:

- Increased "bias" training. A quarterly or even monthly training session is not capable of covering over years of trauma-based camaraderie in police forces. I can tell you from experience, we don't take it seriously, the proctors let us cheat on whatever "tests" there are, and we all made fun of it later over coffee.

- Tougher laws. I hope you understand by now, cops do not follow the law and will not hold each other accountable to the law. Tougher laws are all the more reason to circle the wagons and protect your brothers and sisters.
- More community policing programs. Yes, there is a marginal effect when a few cops get to know members of the community, but look at the protests of 2020: many of the cops pepper-spraying journalists were probably the nice school cop a month ago.

Police officers do not protect and serve people, they protect and serve the status quo, “polite society”, and private property. Using the incremental mechanisms of the status quo will never reform the police because the status quo relies on police violence to exist. Capitalism requires a permanent underclass to exploit for cheap labor and it requires the cops to bring that underclass to heel.

Instead of wasting time with minor tweaks, I recommend exploring the following ideas:

- No more qualified immunity. Police officers should be personally liable for all decisions they make in the line of duty.
- No more civil asset forfeiture. Did you know that every year, citizens like you lose more cash and property to unaccountable civil asset forfeiture than to all burglaries combined? The police can steal your stuff without charging you with a crime and it makes some police departments very rich.
- Break the power of police unions. Police unions make it nearly impossible to fire bad cops and incentivize protecting them to protect the power of the union. A police union is not a labor union; police officers are powerful state agents, not exploited workers.
- Require malpractice insurance. Doctors must pay for insurance in case they botch a surgery, police officers should do the same for botching a police raid or other use of force. If human decency won't motivate police to respect human life, perhaps hitting their wallet might.
- Defund, demilitarize, and disarm cops. Thousands of police departments own assault rifles, armored personnel carriers, and stuff you'd see in a warzone. Police officers have grants and huge budgets to spend on guns, ammo, body armor, and combat training. 99% of calls for service require no armed response, yet **when all you have is a gun, every problem feels like target practice.** Cities are not safer when unaccountable bullies have a monopoly on state violence and the equipment to execute that monopoly.

One final idea: **consider abolishing the police.**

I know what you're thinking, "What? We need the police! They protect us!" As someone who did it for nearly a decade, I need you to understand that by and large, police protection is marginal, incidental. It's an illusion created by decades of copaganda designed to fool you into thinking these brave men and women are holding back the barbarians at the gates.

I alluded to this above: the vast majority of calls for service I handled were theft reports, burglary reports, domestic arguments that hadn't escalated into violence, loud parties, (houseless) people loitering, traffic collisions, very minor drug possession, and arguments between

neighbors. Mostly the mundane ups and downs of life in the community, with little inherent danger. And, like I mentioned, the vast majority of crimes I responded to (even violent ones) had already happened; my unaccountable license to kill was irrelevant.

What I mainly provided was an “objective” third party with the authority to document property damage, ask people to chill out or disperse, or counsel people not to beat each other up. A trained counselor or conflict resolution specialist would be ten times more effective than someone with a gun strapped to his hip wondering if anyone would try to kill him when he showed up. There are many models for community safety that can be explored if we get away from the idea that the only way to be safe is to have a man with a M4 rifle prowling your neighborhood ready at a moment’s notice to write down your name and birthday after you’ve been robbed and beaten.

You might be asking, “What about the armed robbers, the gangsters, the drug dealers, the serial killers?” And yes, in the city I worked, I regularly broke up gang parties, found gang members carrying guns, and handled homicides. I’ve seen some tragic things, from a reformed gangster shot in the head with his brains oozing out to a fifteen year old boy taking his last breath in his screaming mother’s arms thanks to a gang member’s bullet. I know the wages of violence.

This is where we have to have the courage to ask: why do people rob? Why do they join gangs? Why do they get addicted to drugs or sell them? It’s not because they are inherently evil. I submit to you that these are the results of living in a capitalist system that grinds people down and denies them housing, medical care, human dignity, and a say in their government. These are the results of white supremacy pushing people to the margins, excluding them, disrespecting them, and treating their bodies as disposable.

Equally important to remember: disabled and mentally ill people are frequently killed by police officers not trained to recognize and react to disabilities or mental health crises. Some of the people we picture as “violent offenders” are often people struggling with untreated mental illness, often due to economic hardships. Very frequently, the officers sent to “protect the community” escalate this crisis and ultimately wound or kill the person. Your community was not made safer by police violence; a sick member of your community was killed because it was cheaper than treating them. Are you extremely confident you’ll never get sick one day too?

Wrestle with this for a minute: if all of someone’s material needs were met and all the members of their community were fed, clothed, housed, and dignified, why would they need to join a gang? Why would they need to risk their lives selling drugs or breaking into buildings? If mental healthcare was free and was not stigmatized, how many lives would that save?

Would there still be a few bad actors in the world? Sure, probably. What’s my solution for them, you’re no doubt asking. I’ll tell you what: generational poverty, food insecurity, homelessness, and for-profit medical care are all problems that can be solved in our lifetimes by rejecting the dehumanizing meat grinder of capitalism and white supremacy. Once that’s done, we can work on the edge cases together, with clearer hearts not clouded by a corrupt system.

Police abolition is closely related to the idea of prison abolition and the entire concept of banishing the carceral state, meaning, creating a society focused on reconciliation and restorative justice instead of punishment, pain, and suffering — a system that sees people in crisis as humans, not monsters. People who want to abolish the police typically also want to abolish prisons, and the same questions get asked: “What about the bad guys? Where do we put them?” I bring this up because abolitionists don’t want to simply replace cops with armed social workers or prisons with casual detention centers full of puffy leather couches and Playstations. We imagine a world

not divided into good guys and bad guys, but rather a world where people's needs are met and those in crisis receive care, not dehumanization.

Here's legendary activist and thinker Angela Y. Davis putting it better than I ever could:

“An abolitionist approach that seeks to answer questions such as these would require us to imagine a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscapes of our society. In other words, we would not be looking for prisonlike substitutes for the prison, such as house arrest safeguarded by electronic surveillance bracelets. Rather, positing decarceration as our overarching strategy, we would try to envision a continuum of alternatives to imprisonment-demilitarization of schools, revitalization of education at all levels, a health system that provides free physical and mental care to all, and a justice system based on reparation and reconciliation rather than retribution and vengeance.” (Are Prisons Obsolete, pg. 107)

I'm not telling you I have the blueprint for a beautiful new world. What I'm telling you is that the system we have right now is broken **beyond repair** and that it's time to consider new ways of doing community together. Those new ways need to be negotiated by members of those communities, particularly Black, indigenous, disabled, houseless, and citizens of color historically shoved into the margins of society. Instead of letting Fox News fill your head with nightmares about Hispanic gangs, ask the Hispanic community what they need to thrive. Instead of letting racist politicians scaremonger about pro-Black demonstrators, ask the Black community what they need to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. If you truly desire safety, ask not what your most vulnerable can do for the community, ask what the community can do for the most vulnerable.

A WORLD WITH FEWER BASTARDS IS POSSIBLE

If you take only one thing away from this essay, I hope it's this: do not talk to cops. But if you only take two things away, I hope the second one is that it's possible to imagine a different world where unarmed black people, indigenous people, poor people, disabled people, and people of color are not routinely gunned down by unaccountable police officers. It doesn't have to be this way. Yes, this requires a leap of faith into community models that might feel unfamiliar, but I ask you:

When you see a man dying in the street begging for breath, don't you want to leap away from that world?

When you see a mother or a daughter shot to death sleeping in their beds, don't you want to leap away from that world?

When you see a twelve year old boy executed in a public park for the crime of playing with a toy, Jesus fucking Christ, can you really just stand there and think “This is normal”?

And to any cops who made it this far down, is this really the world you want to live in? Aren't you tired of the trauma? Aren't you tired of the soul sickness inherent to the badge? Aren't you tired of looking the other way when your partners break the law? Are you really willing to kill the next George Floyd, the next Breonna Taylor, the next Tamir Rice? How confident are you that your next use of force will be something you're proud of? I'm writing this for you too: it's

wrong what our training did to us, it's wrong that they hardened our hearts to our communities, and it's wrong to pretend this is normal.

Look, I wouldn't have been able to hear any of this for much of my life. You reading this now may not be able to hear this yet either. But do me this one favor: just think about it. Just turn it over in your mind for a couple minutes. "Yes, And" me for a minute. Look around you and think about the kind of world you want to live in. Is it one where an all-powerful stranger with a gun keeps you and your neighbors in line with the fear of death, or can you picture a world where, as a community, we embrace our most vulnerable, meet their needs, heal their wounds, honor their dignity, and make them family instead of desperate outsiders?

If you take only three things away from this essay, I hope the third is this: **you and your community don't need bastards to thrive.**

RESOURCES TO YES-AND WITH

- Achele Mbembe — Necropolitics
- Angela Y. Davis — Are Prisons Obsolete?
- CriticalResistance.org — Abolition Toolkit
- Joe Macaré, Maya Schenwar, and Alana Yu-lan Price — Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect?
- Ruth Wilson Gilmore — COVID-19. Decarceration, Abolition

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