Losing faith in our police



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In the wake of yet another police killing of a civilian, this time a 12-year-old boy in Cleveland named Tamir Rice, it should be apparent to just about everyone that there is a growing sense that the average person has more to fear from the police than from criminals.



Paramilitary tactics, no-knock raids (sometimes on incorrect addresses), thug-like responses to civilians with cameras and a host of other issues suggest that the motto "to protect and to serve" is just a quaint expression from the past. It has gotten so bad that exemplary police behavior now is treated as legitimate news due to its rarity. It has gotten so bad that reasonable people are becoming increasingly unwilling to call the police for any reason.

This is a sad state of affairs.

If another dead child is unpersuasive, consider these:

- In a case of mistaken identity, police in Fullerton, Calif., beat Kelly Thomas to death. Thomas had committed no crime.
- The NYPD killed Eric Garner, an asthmatic, by placing him in an overzealous chokehold. Garner had

committed no crime.

• A 1-year-old baby in Atlanta suffered severe brain trauma and third-degree burns when police, executing a no-knock warrant, threw a grenade into his crib.

American parents are routinely threatened with jail for allowing their children to play outside unattended but no charges were levied against police who threw the grenade at a baby. Astonishingly, the county sheriff defended the police action by saying that there were "no clothes, there was (sic) no toys, there's nothing to indicate that there was (sic) children present in the home."

Because clothes and toys somehow would have made a difference.

Of course, these are all anecdotes. To draw meaningful conclusions, we would need comprehensive data of the kind that the FBI keeps for literally every other type of crime in the United States. You can even find information on justifiable homicides by peace officers in the line of duty (460 in 2013). What you won't find is the number of innocent people killed or assaulted by police. There is, fantastically, no law requiring police departments to report police crime to the FBI.

Private citizens now are trying to fill this void. One effort, a crowd-sourced website called fatalencounters.org, documents nearly 400 instances of unjustified police shootings of citizens in 2013 alone. To put that in perspective, the FBI reports that in the same year 27 police officers were killed in the line of duty.

The police assert that they put their lives on the line every day. But policing is a remarkably safe occupation. Garbage collectors, to offer just one example, face an on-the-job fatality rate three times that of police officers. The job is safe in another, more unfortunate way, too: When police misconduct is investigated, it is the police who do the investigating.

On top of that, the law grants police automatic immunity for actions that would land any of the rest of us in prison. The many meaningful incentives citizens have to avoid breaking the law are largely absent where police are concerned. And the police know it.

Americans long ago lost faith in our politicians. We are quickly losing faith in our police. A good first step to restoring that faith would be to hold our police to the same standards of behavior and accountability to which we hold the citizens they purportedly serve. Keeping clear records of when police run afoul of these standards wouldn't hurt either.

Antony Davies is associate professor of economics at Duquesne University. James R. Harrigan is director of academic programs at Strata in Logan, Utah.

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