Mistrust Between the Police and African-Americans In Memphis: Wokefield Police Department

Milestone 1 Assignment

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Statement of the Problem

In a city where 70% of the population is colored and 63% black, relations between the police and the African-American population have never been tenser (Kabede, 2016). Dating to the Martin Luther King Jr. era, the city continues to struggle with police-community relations. The issue is aggravated by the underrepresentation of the black population in the police force; black officers account for 51.6% of the force, while white officers representing the city's 27.5% population account for 46.7% of the force (Moore & Thomas, 2014). The 2019 police shooting of Brandon Webber further heightened these tense relations as scores of African-Americans poured to the streets to protest the shooting of an unarmed young black man in what is now part of the American public safety norm (Moore & Thomas, 2014). Piling onto a list of growing young African-Americans shot dead by the police, the ensuing response exemplified just how the police force responds to such tragedies ineptly. These tense relationships explain the high levels of armed crime and real estate crime in a city ranked as one of the most violent across America. In the week-long ensuing protests, the police responded violently, apprehending numerous black people, especially after 24 of the WPD officers suffered various injuries (Bella & Iati, 2019).

How It Is Affecting the Community in Memphis

The predicament is a national one; nonetheless, in Memphis, it alienates an already alienated population. Such relations disenfranchise the black community and segregate from numerous Memphis programs intended to rectify these relations. Police violence, prejudice, and profiling of the black community not only creates tense relations but also spread fear across the community. In light of escalated shootings of young African-Americans not only in Memphis but across the nation, the norm when stopped by a police officer has been to approach the officer with raised arm and phone at hand ready to record any dealings with an officer. Such is the proof of the fear the black community lives by daily. It also widens the rift between Memphis' diverse populations. As opposed to working to realize the Public Safety Institute's goal of advancing the best public safety practices, these tense relations empower the white community to feel superior while rendering the black community inferior.

Relevant Criminological Theories That Apply

Conflict theories best explain the mistrust between the police and the African-American population in Memphis. Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones, and Brooks (2016) explain that the mistrust between these two factions is reminiscent of the '60s and '70s when the police used their power and authority to brutalize the dissenting minorities in America. Prejudicial mistreatment and mishandling of African-Americans dates back to the slavery era when whites oppressed and suppressed black people from realizing their potential. Consequently, these sentiments and innuendos propagated in the dark ages continue to the present. Nonetheless, this is not to say that the African-American population is not to blame for such mistrust with the Wokefield Police Department. According to the social disorganization theory, African-Americans are more likely perpetrators of crime since their residential locations, disadvantaged neighborhoods and culture inculcate criminal tendencies in young African Americans right from a tender age more than their individual characteristics. Consequently, the police are more inclined to stopping, scrutinizing and profiling the black community. Such disadvantages as poverty, lower literacy levels, and general decadency increase the community's propensity for armed and real estate crime.

**Analysis of the Problem**

Scope of The Criminal Justice Issue

The tense relationship between the African-American population and the police dates to the late 1900's when large businesses in Memphis, such as FedEx and Autozone, commenced and awarded white-collar jobs to middle- and upper-class whites, leaving African-Americans to impoverishment (Esri). As of 2015, Memphis ranked highest of the largest 53 metros across the U.S. in impoverishment with a 27.6% rate against the national 14% rate. Memphis' tensions between the police and the African-American population circle back to the high poverty levels in the black community. The police, all through history, have played a frontline role in suppressing and oppressing African-Americans, helping to instigate a white beneficial position in Memphis. Similarly, the city is one of the two cities across the U.S., both of which are predominantly black, that have in the past hang billboards across town warning people from entering the city due to high crime rates (Tulumello, 2018). An occurrence alien to predominantly white cities, such decisions not only chase away tourists but also communicate of a force incensed by a desire to control, authoritatively at that, control a population they consider violent, homicidal, and unruly. Coupled with the recent increased scrutiny on the police due to prejudicial mistreatment and handling of the African-American population, the police are now stricter and harsher on African-Americans as they seek to curb crime. Nonetheless, the result is more adverse as tensions continue flaring, and relations break down even further.

Recurring Trends or Patterns That City Data Reveals About the Issue

Firstly, Memphis is a predominantly black and colored city as African-Americans comprise 63% of the total city population (Kabede, 2016). Carefully examining the percentage of black police officers in Memphis shows that African-Americans are underrepresented as black officers make up 51% of the force while white officers representing the city's 27.5% population make up 46.7% of the entire force (Moore & Thomas, 2014). In such a heavily black city, the expectation would be more representation of the black population in the force since black officers are more inclined to understand better and cultivate positive relations with their fellow African-Americans. Such underrepresentation, therefore, sets the precedence for a pattern of underrepresenting and underserving the black community. Like the rest of the 19 000 law enforcement agencies across the country, the WPD is also plagued by controversy and misconduct up to the highest level. From excessively using deadly and physical force to discriminatory arrest patterns, the Wokefield police continue to serve as a problem for African-Americans instead of serving as a solution to the numerous predicaments this community battles from its 33.8% poverty prevalence rate to 28.4 for every 100 000 people nationally toping homicidal rate (Esri).

Secondly, data obtained by Thompson (2017) showed that between 2011 and 2016, the WPD's internal affairs department received 268 use of excessive force by officers complaints out of which a sole 33 were sustained. The department threw out the other 235 for lack of enough evidence to show wrongdoing. Despite the citywide recording of numerous cases of officer prejudicially using excess force on blacks, such decisions continue to propagate tense relations. The mistrust runs deep as residents comprehend that reporting to the police an issue about their fellow officers will never yield any substantial results. Extrapolating from these reported cases attests to a pattern of using excessive and physical force on blacks to oppress and suppress them. An already impoverished community suffering at the hands of a 'rogue' police unit further strains relationships.

External Contributing Factors Supported by Research

The key contributing factor is the role played by the Memphis Police Association's spat with local politicians and policymakers. As the only second city to do so, the MPA commissioned billboards across the city, declaring it a dangerous city and branding local politicians and policymakers as insensitive to the city's public safety needs (Tulumello, 2018). Such interference from the organization creates polarization between the police and the local community since it amounts to branding the local community dangerous. Despite the city recording high crime rates, the MPA's decision to hang such billboards contravenes programs such as the 2017 Safe Community Plan that aims to integrate the community in policing and repair relations between the police and the African-American population (Crime Commission). A second eternal contributing factor to such tense relations is the national targeting of African-Americans by the police. According to available data, police are 14% more likely to use excessive force on an African-American compared to other populations (Arthur, 2019).

Similarly, the cropping up of such movements as Black Lives Matter and other African-American civil rights movement further thaws this relationship. These movements primarily advocate for African-American rights without looping in the police by either educating them or enlightening them on black culture, problems, and issues (Anderson, Reinsmith-Jones & Brooks, 2016). Creating a basis of understanding is the key to fixing this relationship and fostering trust between a broken, marginalized, and forcefully policed community prejudicially misconceived as violent, thugs, and criminals.

Internal Contributing Factors Supported by Details Provided in The Scenario

Decreased officer productivity owing to increased national scrutiny on policy officers is the leading cause of officer demotivation and unproductivity at the WPD, which explains the worsening relationship with the local community. A demotivated police force is prone to making errors in judgment, operating forcefully to police a community considered dangers by national crime statistics standards, and failing to work to mend this relationship. The recent increase in police conduct insight, nonetheless, should be a motivator for the WPD to mend this relationship to protect better and serve the people of Memphis. As opposed to demotivating the force, it should motivate officers to work to combating crime and involving the locals just as the Safety Community Plan spearheaded by the Memphis Crime Commission intends (Crime Commission). Secondly, a reduction in the available funding for personal items benefits is also a contributing factor to the predicament at hand. Despite the city's efforts to mend these relationships through the Public Safety Institute that loops in researchers to help provide actionable solutions to crime and officers' relations with the local community, appeasing officers should take precedence to help align their priorities and rectify the sour relations.

The Root Cause of The Issue

The root cause of mistrust between the police and the African-American community is not a matter of national police scrutiny; it is a historical problem dating to the slavery era. The police, a national security organ, contributed to the oppression and suppression of a minority community. Consequently, the notions and nuances of African-Americans established in these eras continue to the present, leading to the police heavily and unnecessary policing blacks. In this process, it leads to prejudice and racial profiling, which dissolves any existing iota of trust. Similarly, the police's failure to include the community, understand or accommodate them in their policing efforts contributes to this mistrust. The city's failure to establish programs to make African-Americans feel a sense of belonging and the police failing to understand the impoverished community and help them acclimate and progress are the root cause of this mistrust and, as such, high crime rates.

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