



Student National Medical Association Statement on Police Brutality

Health Policy and Legislative Affairs Committee

Statement on Police Brutality

Second Revision

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Introduction

Established in 1964 by Medical School students, the Student National Medical Association (SNMA) is the nation's oldest and largest organization focused on the needs and concerns of medical students of color. In addition, the SNMA is dedicated to practices leading to better health care for minority and underrepresented communities. As these communities are disproportionately subject to the practice and consequences of police brutality, the SNMA strongly opposes the medical, social, and political infractions incurred via these acts of excessive force.

Background

Police brutality is defined as any act of unmerited excessive and aggressive physical, mental, and/or emotional abuse, above and beyond the law, enacted upon by an individual or groups of individuals in law enforcement. Police brutality results in potentially severe mental and physical injury. The types of physical injuries sustained are similar to those experienced by victims of violent crime such as assault and homicide. These injuries commonly result from night-stick or baton beatings, pistol whippings, beatings by fist or boot, restraint holds, and shootings⁴. Examples of physical injuries include, but are not limited to skin abrasion/laceration, bone fracture, asphyxiation, parenchymal nerve injury, contusion, concussion, skull fracture, epidermal & subdural hematoma, pneumothorax, and hemothorax. Complications of such injuries include post-traumatic cerebral edema, infections, hydrocephalus (secondary to blood or infection in the sub-arachnoid space), post-traumatic epilepsy (secondary to sustained contusions and lacerations), paralysis, permanent disability and death.

Damage caused by police brutality goes beyond the physical manifestations. Psychological trauma faced by victim(s) manifests itself in many ways, such as stress, anxiety, fear, paranoia, distrust, insomnia, anorexia, and depression. Such psychological symptoms can further be manifested as Acute Stress Disorder (ASD) and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Psychological stress often consumes many facets of victims' lives, adversely affecting job performance, ability to sustain employment, and everyday interactions with family and associates. Moreover the families of fatally injured victims often suffer many of the same psychological tolls. Police brutality must be recognized,

investigated, and acted upon as a serious health concern because of its obvious deleterious effects on individuals, their families and communities.

Scope of the Problem

Epidemic numbers of racial minorities are being unjustly scrutinized, brutalized and even killed at the hands of law enforcement in the U.S. According to limited research, more than two thousand individuals have been killed by police officers since 1990 – 75% of whom were people of color⁴. Many more have been injured in incidents that have gone unreported due to the social pressures facing victims.

The American law enforcement community has historically demonstrated unjust scrutiny against African-American and Latino members of society. This scrutiny has, in turn, led to numerous unmerited physical and psychological attacks upon minorities resulting not only in permanent disability, but also the death of innocent law abiding Americans. Such unwarranted incidents resulting in injury and murder constitute direct attacks upon the civil rights of many ethnic minorities in the United States. Police brutality and the use of unwarranted physical and emotional force ultimately compromise the physical and mental health of victims and their families while ignoring the need for psychological and social intervention and support of law enforcement officers.

The SNMA understands the high demands and stressful environments in which officer's work. The effect of multiple exposures to stressful occurrences compound the emotional, mental, and physical exhaustion often felt by officers. The tendency to suppress emotional distress can partly be explained by the restraint of emotional expression within the police culture³. This suppression of emotion can also result in avoidance and dissociation, leading to a chronic state of PTSD. Law enforcement workers suffering from uncontrolled feelings of anxiety, stress, fear, and helplessness can become easily excited, aggressive, angry, and violent in situations where they feel and can exert a heightened sense of control and power. Appropriate prevention, intervention, and treatment of stress associated with police work are essential to preventing psychosocial impairments that contribute to police brutality³.

Statement of Position and Recommendations

We, the members of the SNMA recognize that police brutality threatens the physical, emotional, and psychological health of those involved and should be addressed not only as an issue of social reform, but also as one of public health. For these reasons, The Student National Medical Association (SNMA) supports:

1. The recognition of police brutality against minority communities as a serious, ongoing public health issue that requires nationwide medical and legal investigation and action.
2. The reevaluation of law enforcement training, specifically with regards to the inclusion of mechanisms to promote and maintain psychological and emotional wellness of officers.
3. The civil rights of minority groups and the necessary efforts by law enforcement officials to treat minorities in an equitable and unbiased manner void of undue psychological and physical injury.
4. The abolition of law enforcement strategies such as racial profiling, which prejudicially place the lives and liberties of members of certain minority groups in jeopardy.
5. The appropriate retribution and/or medical and psychological treatment to victims of police brutality and their families following incidents that have resulted in physical, psychological, and/or emotional distress.

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