

10. Armed police

Lately many people have been paying attention to the use of lethal force by police. Many people think that police violence is excessive, and studies show that it disproportionately affects Black people.¹ As a result, police departments across the United States have started implementing training programs to address police violence and the related issue of systemic racism. However, some people believe that training programs are not enough to address these issues. They think that in addition to training police more effectively, police departments should take away many of their guns.

On one hand, some people believe that a world in which police officers do not carry guns (or a world in which most police officers do not carry guns most of the time) would be better overall than a world in which they do. They think that when police are armed, they are more likely to use excessive violence, especially against Black people. Granted, if police did not carry guns, there might be some cases in which they were less able to prevent violence than they are now. But there would also be many cases in which they were less able to cause violence than they are now, and the hope is that the good effects of disarming police would outweigh the bad. Indeed, in countries such as Iceland, Ireland, Britain, New Zealand, and Norway, most police officers do not carry guns, and the results seem to be positive.²

On the other hand, many people believe that a world in which police officers carry guns is better than a world in which they do not. They think that police officers need guns to perform their duty – to protect citizens from the threat of dangerous criminals who intend to harm them. They also think that police officers need guns to protect themselves. After all, we are asking them to do a dangerous job. How can we ask them to serve and protect and then take away their means for doing so safely? Especially since, as Police Academy trainer Richard Fairburn points out, if some police officers are not armed, then others might have to risk their lives to save them.³ Indeed, even in places like the United Kingdom, people regularly debate whether or not to arm more officers whenever an officer dies on duty or whenever a terrorist attack takes place.⁴ Gun violence and terrorism are here to stay, and police need to be armed so that they can be prepared to confront any threat that might appear.

Study Questions:

1. Given that police officers already have risky jobs, is it morally permissible to make them even riskier for the sake of improving public safety overall?
2. How, if at all, would things be different if police violence did not disproportionately impact Black people?
3. How, if at all, would things be different if the general public had less access to guns as well?

1. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/us/study-supports-suspicion-that-police-use-of-force-is-more-likely-for-blacks.html>
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/02/18/5-countries-where-police-officers-do-not-carry-firearms-and-it-works-well/>
3. <https://www.policeone.com/police-products/firearms/articles/1716565-Why-cops-carry-guns/>
4. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/robert-koehler/should-the-police-be-armed_b_7083444.html