

Lyrics of Dissident Youth Cultures and Police  
Misconduct in the United States

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## **Introduction**

Music is a strong messenger and for many people the best way to express their emotions. Throughout the world, history and culture, music is, and always was, a medium for social criticism and political messaging. It is often used to criticize contemporary problems in our society, during the '60s and '70s, the anti-war movement was accompanied by a powerful expression of political ideals via music (Rodinzky, 2016). A continuation of that revolutionary and confrontational spirit can be seen in punk and rap, yet they're often misunderstood as being disrespectful and antisocial, despite containing meaningful socio-political critiques. People tend to disregard criticisms of artists as complaints by outsiders of society or even by criminals. This results in the loss of two major sources of complaints about the reality of US policing methods. The following analysis collects accusations and descriptions of police misconduct and violence in American punk and rap lyrics and compares them to real life data of problems with policing in order to scrutinize if these genres are useful sources of criticism despite their negative reputation. We will compare the accusations in the songs by five motives: racism, corruption, violence, deadly violence, and sexual violence.

A sample of both music genres is relevant because they each have a different audience. Rap has been popular among Black teenagers while punk attracts a mainly White audience. Both scenes have their origin in working-class and working poor neighborhoods. A downside of these samples is that both music scenes are predominantly male, hence an absolute conclusion for all genders over the last decades can't be drawn.

**Rap** originated in the 1970's in the working-class communities of the Bronx, NYC. At block parties DJs started to use and extend percussion breaks of disco, soul and funk songs. MCs, who were talking to the audience between the songs soon started to talk and rhyme in tone with the music (Dye, 2007). During that same time neoliberal economics started to be implemented, meaning deindustrialization and disinvestment policies came into effect. Under conditions of severe discrimination, exclusion and abandonment, rap gave young POCs a creative outlet to react to impoverishment, racialized social policies, Reaganomics, capitalism and police violence. Rap was conditioned by neoliberal policies of criminalization and over policing of POC youth. Later, in the '80s, rap too emerged on the West Coast. Despite its political origin, popular rap is marked by commodification through capital and social critical sentiments have often been replaced with neoliberal values. (Osuna 2019). Notwithstanding this commodification, there are still many political rap songs written, especially regarding police violence. "(...) Rap (...) challenges hegemonic interpretations of the world and complicate what is often thought of as common sense by providing alternative perspectives" (Osuna 2019).

**Punk rock** emerged first among the white working-class youth in England and NYC during the late '70s. As a subgenre of rock, it is defined by its fast, aggressive sound and confrontational, non-conformist lyrics (The River Street Jazz Café, 2022). Similar to rap, punk was a reaction to restrictive conservative values, police violence, Thatcherism and Reaganomics. During Reagan's presidency, for example, multiple punk bands took part in a series of concerts called 'Rock Against Reagan'. Due to the style typical for punk, the scene was subjected to constant observation and over policing. For many white teenagers, this was the first time they

could at least somewhat grasp the daily experience of POC youth (Billet 2020).

Many people think that punk and rap culture transitions teenagers into outsiders and antagonists of society who see society undesirable, something to revolt against because of the culture. However, the truth is that rap and punk are mostly delinquent and aggressive towards capitalist society as a reaction to its injustice, racism, corruption and police violence. Rap and punk do not make teenagers revolt against society, but rather they are tools for teenagers to use as a reaction to the unjust experiences they have had. Both cultures are the result not the cause; a safe space that offers a counterculture to the dreads of Reaganism, post-Reaganist neoliberal capitalism, and authoritarian use of police forces; a canvas for criticism.

### **Method**

The narratives we see on the news, so called narratives of precision, are constructed by state agents in order to limit the public's sense of social injustice. The narratives of punk and rap lyrics are to be considered as disordered narratives, showing a broader reality, not the version of the media and police (Osuna 2019).

For this paper I analyzed the lyrics of 10 punk songs and 10 rap songs for the accusations they make against policing, police and other law enforcement in the United States. Afterwards I reviewed data by the FBI and the DOJ and other sources regarding police misconduct. The problem with these statistics is that they mostly consist of self-reports from police departments, hence we have to

expect that police misconduct is underreported, with the actual number of cases being much higher than the recorded number. The handling of statistics regarding CompStat is proof that we have to be careful with police-made statistics (Rayman 2013). Finally, I compared the findings of both analyses to draw a conclusion about the validity of the artist’s criticism of police misconduct. Subject-specific literature like the books of Balko, Maher and Vitale helped me to further understand the reality of police misconduct in the US.

The songs I study were recorded between 1974 and 2021, constituting about 47 years of music history. The analyzed sample is relatively small compared to the endless amount of punk and rap songs that criticize the police. However, the aim of this paper is not to present the vast amount of such songs but to compare allegations common to these songs with real life data and assert the validity of these accounts. The accusations analyzed here are separated by five motives: **racism, corruption, violence, deadly violence, and sexual violence.**

| Punk   | Rap   |
|--|---|
| Anti-Flag – Police State                         | Body Count – Black Hoody  |
| Dead Kennedys – Police Truck                     | Frank Ocean – Crack Rock JEPGMAFIA – I just Killed a Cop, Now I’m Horny           |
| Dead Kennedys – I Fought the Law and I Won       | KRS One – Sound of da Police  |
| D.O.A. – Police Brutality                        | Lil Baby – The Bigger Picture   |
| <del>Destructo</del> Disk – Cops/Dogs Government | N.W.A. – <u>Fuck</u> the Police   |
| Warning – Police State Left Over Crack           | People Under the Stairs – The Effect of Climate Change on Densely Populated Areas |
| Gang Control Mischief Brew – Bang-Up             | Saba – Busy/Sirens  |
| Policework Poison Idea – The Badge               | The Coup – Ride the Fence   |
| Suicidal Tendencies – Fascist Pig                | Tupac – Violent   |

## **Findings**

**Racism:** The topic of racism is significantly more present in rap lyrics, this is not surprising since many rappers are Black, hence more likely to face racial oppression. Punk bands on the other hand, predominantly consist of Whites who are not the victims of racism. This does not mean that punk bands ignore racism - it is a recurring motive - just not as dominant as it is in rap lyrics. Also, some of the punk songs in the sample put themselves into the position of a police officer to criticize the police, hence some of the text displays racism from the perpetrator perspective. The rap songs all take the position of the victim or spectator of police brutality. Furthermore, racism is often only identifiable when we keep in mind that all the rappers in this sample are Black, hence negative attitudes, like unsubstantiated arrest of the protagonist by police delineates racism. Due to systemic racism, Black people are most likely to become victims of racially biased police misconduct.

The songs by KRS One, Lil Baby, N.W.A. and Body Count directly criticize the problem of racism within policing in the US: “A Young ni[...]a got it bad 'cause I'm brown/ And not the other color so police think/ They have the authority to kill a minority.”, “Lights start flashin' behind me/ But they're scared of a ni[...]a so they mace me to blind me” (N.W.A.) and “And now you can kill a motherfucker just because of how he's dressed/ Are you fucking serious/ [...] I didn't have a gun so why am I dead?”. From Eric Garner and George Floyd to Breana Taylor and many more victims, police officers are acting in clearly racially biased ways, might it be because of systematic racism or because they personally are racist. This racism combined with the predominantly violent approach of American policing is responsible for the high death

toll of non-white, mostly Black people by police officers (Nelis 2021). The murder of Tyre Nichols in Memphis shows that racist and violent police attitudes are not necessarily perpetrated by white cops (Cochrane 2023). Black officers trained by the same narrative of ‘dangerous people in deprived areas’, usually Black or Hispanic neighborhoods, learn the violent attitude of their White colleagues. Hence, simply increasing the number of Black officers is doing little to change this problem. This racism, innate to the system of policing, is criticized by The Coup in the lines “They antisocial, pointin’ M16s / Guess I’m anit-the-anti- ni[...]er machine.” Additionally, People Under the Stairs claim “Cops, they tryn’ to function but they takin’ down us brown people at will” The connection of racism and policing in the United States is a major topic of criticism in music, especially in rap due to its ethnic background of mostly Black and Hispanic artists, who come from deprived and over-policed neighborhoods (Osuna 2019).

KRS One’s comparison of police officers in his song “Sound of da Police”, hinting at the origins of American police, is adding a history lesson to the subject; “Take the word overseer, like a sample/ Repeat it very quickly in a crew, for example/ Overseer, overseer, overseer, overseer/ Officer, officer, officer, officer, officer/ Yeah, officer from overseer/ You need a little clarity? Check the similarity/ The overseer rode around the plantation/ The officer is off, patrollin’ all the nation/ The overseer could stop you, "what you're doin'?" / The officer will pull you over just when he's pursuin’/ The overseer had the right to get ill/ And if you fought back, the overseer had the right to kill/ The officer has the right to arrest/ And if you fight back they put a hole in your chest (woop)/ They both ride horses/ After 400 years, I've got no choices”.

The first police units in New England were founded in order to suppress workers movements, in the South the first departments were born out of slave patrols or from colonialist forces like the Texas Rangers (Vitale 2017). This might have happened more than 100 years ago, but there has never been a significant reform of policing in the US. All changes came slowly, thus there is still similarity in purpose and style of policing. The police are predominantly active in non-white areas, and are extremely aggressive against social movements, whether BLM or environmentalist movements. “Black people still slaves ‘til today” claims KRS One, and he is right; many Black people in this country are serving time in prison where they often work for less than 70ct per hour (Ball 2023; Nelis 2021). Under the 13th Amendment, slavery is only abolished for people who are not convicted of a crime.

Further historical context is given by the Dead Kennedys in their song I fought the Law: “I’m the new folk hero of the Ku Klux Klan/ My cop friends think it’s fine”. During the end of the nadir of race relationship in the United States from 1877 to 1930, the KKK was a very influential group in Southern states, especially Mississippi and Alabama were Klan ruled: Nearly every politician, judge and police officer was appointed by the white supremacist group. But even during the third wave of the Klan, many law enforcement officers in the South have been members of the white supremacist group (Mitchel, 2014; Newton, 2014). The freedom summer murders in Philadelphia, MI, in which three civil rights activists were killed resulted from a cooperation between police and KKK (Mitchel, 2014). Even if the Klan lost its relevance in the right-wing movement, police officers and law enforcement



affiliated with the Klan are still a threat for marginalized groups and their allies. However, alt-right militias like the Oath Keepers or Proud Boys have many members who are army veterans or active law-enforcement (Anti-Defamation League 2022). In the case of Black Panther Fred Hampton, the FBI used the Chicago PD to execute the activist while he was sleeping in his apartment, drugged by an FBI informant (Grace 2022). A connection of police and white supremacy as indicated by the lyrics of the Dead Kennedys is historically accurate.

Looking at this country's history, racism and policing in the United States cannot be seen as separate from each other. While the first police units in New England were formed in order to suppress workers movements, the first police units in the former CSA states were based on former slave patrols and Texas Rangers. The colonialist Rangers used violence to suppress Hispanics and Native Americans to keep white supremacy in place (Vitale 2017; Lineman 2022). Race massacres in the United States, like the countless massacres during the Red Summer of 1919, have often been supported and led by police. In Tulsa and other places, officers handed out guns to white rioters, and they participated as civilians and in uniform. Tulsa Race massacre was planned beforehand - and the police chief, Captain George G. Blaine, was one of the conspirators ("Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921", 2020).

The available data of policing of POCs as a racialized discriminatory practice is repeatedly ignored by the narratives of pro-police voices. In her book "The War on Cops" Heather MacDonald of the Manhattan Institute, a right-wing think tank, repeatedly states the idea that crime among Black communities would decrease if Black fathers wouldn't leave their families,

blithely ignoring the destructive neoliberal policies exhibiting systemic racism: the “war on drugs”; racially biased violence and occupational behavior by police forces; the private prison industry, red lining etc. MacDonald’s book resembles the narrative of many people with pro-police sentiments: Black people are at fault, and, with few exemptions, the police are only doing their job (MacDonald 2016). This generalized targeting of Black people is described by Saba: “Heard that the robber wore a Black mask. /I fit the description, aka ni[...].er, what is the difference?” and by People under the stairs: “Some people call the cops: there’s Black children in the pool.” MacDonalDs conclusion is ignorant and racist.

In summary, Black communities are most likely to experience the failures of policing and this in the most intense ways. 99% of all SWAT raids happen in Black and Latino neighborhoods (LastWeekTonight 2021), one out of 1000 Black males is killed by the police (Edwards 2019) they are twice as likely to be killed by police than White men. Additionally, Black women are 1.4 times more likely to be killed by police than white women (Harris, 2022). Most times, the charges against the suspects are drug related, however, there is no difference in the likelihood of drug use and abuse across race lines, yet it is not white communities that suffer from the ramifications of police failure regarding the war on drugs (Balko 2013).

From the perspective of the US justice apparatus: Black lives don’t matter. To quote Rage Against the Machine:

“Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses.”

Corruption: Both genres accuse the police of corrupt behavior. From KRS One, who claims the police are selling crack in Sound of da Police, to the song Police Truck by the Dead Kennedys, which is written from the perspective of a police officer who is using his position solely to commit crimes, all of them have real life connections.

The fact that killings by police officers are seldomly scrutinized is reflected in the lines “You can get away with murder if you've got a badge” and “The law don't mean shit if you've got the right friends/ That's how this country's run [...] I am the law and I won” by the Dead Kennedys, “Cops always protect their own/ When they cover up, the mistrust grows” by D.O.A., “The DA portrayed him as a dirty fucking street crook/ They let the cops off, nobody fucking marched” by Body Count and “Corrupted police been the problem where I'm from” by Lil Baby. One example of this circumstance is the media coverage of the death of George Floyd before the video of his death went viral. His death was mentioned on a side note as a man who died in police custody of “medical distress”, - a few days later the world was about to find out that this ‘medical distress’ was the knee of a police officer, which he used to pinch off Floyd’s trachea for ten minutes until he was dead (How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next 2022). This is a usual practice: the police report an incident to the press and the press undisputedly distributes the police’s version (Shenkman et al. 2021). It is nearly impossible to be prosecuted for a killing as a police officer, in the few cases in which it actually happened, like the cases of George Floyd’s or Walter Scott, it was only possible because of public pressure and video evidence. I have to emphasize that the footage in these cases was taken by civilians, not police body cams. Police tend to only publish body cam footage if it helps their case. Even

released footage isn't trustworthy since police often only release convenient parts or highly edited versions of the footage. Additionally, studies found that police body cams increase police violence since the officers feel more comfortable to make the case for themselves. (Maher 2022). Footage like in the murder of Floyd was only helpful because it was in civilian hands, it wasn't shot from the police's angle. Justice is only guaranteed in this country if its citizens are actively fighting for it.

“You claim I'm sellin' crack/ but you be doin' that” by KRS One and the lines ‘How much dope can you push to me? /Crooked cop, dead cop /No good for community’ allude to the fact that police officers are involved in drug trade. Taking money from drug dealers in return for protection is not uncommon. A sample of drug related charges against US police officers of March 2015 alone contains eight cases of officers engaging in major crimes like coercing people to cook meth, stealing drugs from the evidence room and the planned execution of rival dealers or the engagement in drug cartel sponsored sex parties. (Vitale 2017).

The aforementioned cited lyrics of “Police Truck” by the Dead Kennedys have a real-life counterpart in several police gangs inside Los Angeles's Sheriff's Department. At least six police gangs are operating in the LASD: they glorify violent behavior, file false police reports, conduct unlawful searches, and endorse on-duty killings and other violent behavior. Some gangs require on-duty killings for membership. Police officers who are not members of these gangs or who dare to criticize them often face repercussions such as abuse or refused support when requested. The connections of these gangs go as far up as to the highest ranks of the LASD (Dickinson 2023). Left Over Crack states this more directly with their line; “Cause the gang in control is the fucking PD.”

But racist practice has always been innate to the police in Los Angeles. In 1990 the LAPD had the biggest police scandal in recent US history: Policing mostly Hispanic neighborhoods, more than 70 police officers of the Rampart's division so-called CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) unit was implicated in perjury, falsification of reports, abuse of force, wrongful imprisonment, theft, planting evidence and murder. As Osuna concludes; "the LAPD has served as a repressive, anti-working-class police force that has upheld white supremacy and capital accumulation" (2019). These findings can be generalized for policing in the US.

Violence: Anti-Flag describe one instance of police brutality in their song 'Police Brutality': "He hides just standing in the crowd there's nowhere he can run/ The cop comes up behind him and cracks him with a gun/ Drags his bloody ass outside and throws him to the ground." In order to understand the violence of US police officers we have to understand the mindset of officers and the ideology underlying their training. That is the ideology of the thin blue line; the police are all that stands between the good people and the evil criminals, between peace and carnage. The general public is not tough enough to do this job, so the police have to be as tough as the 'evil' is. During their training, many police officers read books or attend presentations by people like Dave Grossman, author of books like "On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society" and "Warrior Mindset." Grossman and others instruct police officers, who are operating in times of peace, to act like soldiers in a warzone (Lineman 2022).

In order to be a more effective part of the thin blue line, many police officers use steroids to boost masculinity, a trait, so the idea,

which is necessary to fight crime (Hoberman 2017; James 2019). This mix of patriarchal masculinity, anabolic steroids and white knight fantasy leads to a practice in which everything suspicious or different is seen as a potential, evil threat, with horrific repercussions - therefore violence against suspects is often automatically seen as just violence. A satirical critique by the Dead Kennedys; “Pull down your dress, here's a kick in the ass/ Let's beat you blue, 'till you shit your pants.” For many police officers, the rough and violent treatment of suspects is part of the punishment and if the suspect turns out to be innocent, this treatment is seen by some officers as educational: don't break the law or this will happen again. In the world of this ideology, there is only good and evil, friend or foe. This is a reason why some police acted so violently against Black Lives Matters rallies, everyone who is criticizing the police, everyone who is not on their side, has to be an enemy (Lineman 2022). Lil Baby portrays this in his lines “Last night, people protesting in Minneapolis escalated/ As demonstrators were lashed by tear gas and rubber bullets” as did Suicidal Tendencies: “Riot squad/ Bash their heads/ Kick their head until they're dead/ I want to be a fascist pig/ Love to fight/ What a thrill/ We don't stop until we kill”. The militarization of police supports this mindset of eternal emergency by equipping departments with caliber .50 rifles, grenade launchers and armored cars (Vitale 2017, Lineman 2022). The criminal is not a person that made wrong decisions, they are an enemy that needs to be defeated with military grade equipment if necessary. The pictures of warzones like during the illegal invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan became real inside the United States. Dehumanized, the criminal is to be erased.

To quote Vitale:

“The fact that police feel the need to constantly bolster their authority with the threat of lethal violence indicates a fundamental crisis in police legitimacy” Vitale 2017.

The idea that police are the only thing that stands between peace and chaos is resembled in the idea of the so-called ‘blue flu’, a narrative among cops that if all cops would stop going to work, the cities would drown in chaos, crime and carnage (Lineman 2022). A study conducted by the Kansas police department proved this concept to be wrong already 60 years ago. Three neighborhoods were used to scrutinize the effects of police presence: the number of officers patrolling one neighborhood was doubled; a second neighborhood was completely unpatrolled; and a third neighborhood, the control group, was patrolled as usual. The finding was that neither the perceived crime nor the actual crime rate changed in these neighborhoods (Kelling 1974). Chicago is another example that proves the incapability of policing in the US. The city is infamous for its violence problem. It has almost twice as many police officers as Los Angeles but around three times as many murders per capita (Maher 2022). Most important, a meta-analysis of more than 200 studies on ecological predictors of crime by Pratt and Cullen (2005) found that legal system measures like police size, police expenditures and police per capita are only minimally successful. They describe these measures as “substantively unimportant.” Additionally, when the NYPD temporarily reduced its force in 2014 after Mayor Bill de Blasio criticized the failure to indict the police officer who murdered Eric Garner, the crime rate in NYC fell about 6%. By this action, the NYPD involuntarily proved its often propagated “broken

windows” approach as ineffective, even as contributing to an increase in crime (Maher 2022; Kahn 2017). US crime rates are not going to decrease by hiring more police officers, in fact, they are likely to increase even further. The lines “We have a warrant for Eazy-E's arrest/ Get down and put your hands right where I can see 'em!/ Man, what the fuck did I do?!/ Man, what did I do?! Just shut the fuck up and get your motherfucking ass on the floor!/ But I didn't do shit Man/ Just shut the fuck up” from N.W.A.'s song “Fuck the Police” indict police of arbitrary warrants. Scrutinizing data of police/SWAT raids, these allegations turn out to be true. Estimates put the number of police raids up to 50,000 per year, with about 60% of them related to searches for drug offenses but only 7% related to actual emergency situations like active shooters incidents or hostage situations. Many of these raids are issued based on thin evidence such as ‘the smell of cannabis’ or the account of a paid informant. These raids happen nearly exclusively in non-white areas and rarely result in the discovery of any drugs. If they do, it's usually a small amount for personal consumption (LastWeekTonight 2021). However, the costs of these ineffective raids are high: the material and the officers need to get paid, the officers damage private property, kill pets and injure or even kill unarmed suspects and in some cases, they do all this while being in the wrong house or apartment. In one infamous case, a police officer threw a flash-bang grenade into a crib, burning the sleeping infant's face (Sack 2017). According to claim-makers, these practices are in direct violation of the fourth amendment; the right to be secure against unreasonable searches or seizures.

There have been several infamous incidents that ended with many fatalities, like the MOVE bombing or the 1969 raid of the LA HQ



of the Black Panther Party for Self-defense (Grace 2022). These situations could have been solved in ways with less or even without fatalities if law enforcement had been trained in proper conflict solving showing the disadvantages of the ‘warrior mindset’.

Deadly violence: Deadly violence is present in most of the lyrics and a comparison with real life data shows that there is a good reason for that. The killing rate of police is more or less the same as the murder rate of the general population. When excessive force complaints with fatality are counted as murder, though, the murder rate of police is 5 times higher than the murder rate of the general population. (Stinson et al 2016; NPMSRP 2010). Since a complaint does not equal proof of murder, these findings should be considered carefully. Furthermore, the used data was submitted by police departments, thus we have to expect it to be incomplete; many people don’t file complaints against the police since they do not expect any outcome from this and because these complaints must usually be made to the police.

Addressing this issue, JPEGMAFIA sings “Hope the cops don’t shoot my friends, shoot my friends” and Desructo Disk is convinced that “all dogs go to heaven / All cops go to hell / Because mans’ best friend won’t put a bullet in your head/ And a cop fucking will” The previously analyzed SWAT raid data shows how militarized the police are and that policing in the USA is tantamount to violent overreactions. Lil Baby claims in his lyrics “They trainin’ officers to kill us” and Mischief Brew add: “Ever think about becoming a cop? /Bang bang, shoot ‘em up / it’s giving them an easy job.” A closer look at police training and tactics shows that this is not far from true. The police are violence workers who learn that their main tool is violence. We can see it in the

aggressive and unnecessary violent reaction of officers during regular traffic stops or during peaceful protests. We saw it in Ferguson in 2014 and we saw it around the country in 2020 during the BLM protests. We can also see it in the militarization of the police. Officers show up to peaceful rallies equipped for a war zone in military style uniforms and with automatic rifles. Under 1033, the Federal Excess Property Program, police departments are reinforced with old gear from the military, including call .50 rifles, mine proof armored cars, and grenade launchers (Balko 2013).

The statistics show us unambiguously that Black people are significantly more likely to get killed by the police as are white people (Sharara et al. 2021), yet even if we ignore this fact, we see that US police still have a remarkably high annual body count. Police officers are trained to be in a constant state of emergency, with the premise that every situation can turn dangerous within seconds (Lineman 2022). The outcome is best described by Body Count: “The fucking cop shot him, yo a ni[...]a's dead/ [...]They aimed at us, they meant business/ They didn't have to shoot him, he didn't have a gun/ What they're gonna say is ‘Why the fuck he run?’/ We can't be seeing this [...] Woop woop, that's the sound of the police/ \*Gunshot\* \*Gunshot\*/ That's the sound on the streets” and Tupac Shakur is adding “My homie panicked/ ("I'm out")/ he tried to run/ (Freeze n[...]gga!)/ I heard a bullet fire from the cop's gun/ My homie dropped [...]” After a killing, officers often claim they have felt threatened by the person, often supporting their claims by stating that they thought the person was armed. Effectively, if the mere possession of a gun can be applied as a justification to kill someone, the right to keep and bear arms is severely infringed and police directly violate the constitution’s second amendment.

In one case in Los Angeles, nervous LAPD officers fired 103 rounds into a van in which two women were stacking newspapers, misinterpreting the resulting sound as gun fire. The perceived constant state of emergency by police - a result of police training based on works by authors like Dave Grossman - is responsible for many unnecessary deaths. Legal defense tactics in which the “heightened emotional state” (created by the constant state of emergency) of police officers is pointed out, are preventing justice for the victims and their families, as well as necessary changes in policing (Lineman 2022). In fatal shooting cases the police often tend to handcuff the body of their victim (Lineman 2022), a phenomenon inspired by police officer’s constant fear which is mentioned by Body Count; “, I'm like ‘What the fuck?! My man's laying dead, they still cuffing him up.’”

Police and their defenders argue how dangerous their job is but a look at the statistics shows that working in logging or as a food delivery driver is deadlier than the job of a police officer. Additionally, most deaths of police officers on duty are results of car crashes or heart attacks, not violence. In the ‘70s, the NYPD made it necessary for officers to issue a report every time they used their gun. This led to a significant decrease of gun fire by police officers, which resulted in fewer deaths of police because suspects were less likely to fire back. In conclusion, less aggressive approaches to policing prevents unnecessary deaths of suspects and of police officers as well (Umbach 2020).

Another problematic aspect of policing in the US is the treatment of people with mental illness as criticized in the song by D.O.A. “Crazy neighbor down the street/ Not too bad just a little off/ Cops called in, they take a stance/ They gun ‘em down never had a

chance”. About half the people killed by the police have some form of mental disability or severe mental illness (McCarthy 2015). These numbers are not surprising since officers are trained to be skeptical towards unusual behavior and to expect every situation to possibly turn violent or even deadly within seconds. Nevertheless, this reality is still shocking (Maher 2022). This is in essence punishing mental conditions with death.

Because of the warrior mindset and the thin blue line ideology, the police are not looking for peaceful solutions. Real life experience shows that deadly force can be prevented and that many dangerous situations are solvable without fatalities. The police killed Walter Scott while he was running away from a police officer, although he was not a threat. In comparison, police in South London used riot shields and trash cans instead of deadly force to get a man with a machete under their control, a man who was an actual threat to the officers and civilians around them (Vitale 2017).

On the other hand, in situations where force is necessary, the police often stand outside and do little to nothing. Emblematic of this problem was the Uvalde shooting in 2022, where nearly 400 police officers were waiting for more than 40 minutes outside of a school with an active shooter inside. However, Uvalde is not an exception; police did the same during the infamous 1999 Columbine shooting in Colorado or the Las Vegas shooting in 2017 (Manning 2023). After a school shooting in Parkland, Florida, which cost the life of 17 human beings, the parents of the victims sued the sheriff’s department for not interfering for 45 minutes. According to the ruling of a federal court, the sheriff had no “...legal duty to protect

students during the shooting...”(Maher, 2022). In 2005 the Supreme Court ruled that police and other law enforcement are not obliged to serve and protect (Maher, 2022). In conclusion, the police use deadly force fairly often but rarely when it would actually be necessary. As Michael Parenti observed: “while they are shy about confronting killers in night clubs or schools...the police continue to perform fearlessly against unarmed individuals.”

**Sexual Violence:** Sexual violence in lyrics includes the mentioning of sexual engagement with prostitutes since these relationships are based on the power the badge brings in a country where prostitution is mostly illegal. In these cases, prostitutes have sex in order to not get arrested or otherwise punished. This type of sex is an abuse of the power imbalance between law enforcement and sex workers, eliminating the possibility of real consent. These are acts of rape.

Forcing females into sexual acts is described in both the songs *Police Truck* by the Dead Kennedys “Don't move child/ I gotta big black stick/ There's six of us babe/ so suck on my dick” and *The Badge* by Poison Idea “Pick up a hooker and take her for a little ride/ But get sucked off on the side”, “Ran a red light, take her for a little ride/ But get sucked off on the side/ The badge means you suck”. Both bands pose as police officers who are perpetrating the crime of rape. *Government Warning* takes the perspective of the attacked, proclaiming I won't be raped or beaten/ by psychos, all in green.

Comparing this allegation with real world data, we see that the bands are not exaggerating: Sexual misconduct is the second most commonly reported type of police misconduct. Officers are twice as

likely to commit sexual assault than the general population, with more than half of their victims being underaged. Women of color and those of indigenous descent are most likely to become victims, as well as young, usually underaged, female novice drivers (Stinson et al 2016; NPMSRP 2010). Estimates state that 5% of police officers commit sexual assault during their career, that means about 50,000 sexual predators walk around in this country with a badge, a gun and qualified immunity (Maher 2022). In the last years several police officers across the country have been prosecuted for acting as pimps, hiring or engaging with underaged prostitutes or assaulting and robbing sex workers (Vitale 2017). Police rapists often search the police database to find vulnerable young women, disproportionately many of whom are Black, and use their criminal record to force these women to satisfy their sexual needs (Maher 2022). Sexual assault in general is already highly underreported, and the available data is mostly based on reports made by police departments, so this data is expected to be incomplete. Victims who have the courage to report these crimes are usually confronted with intimidation tactics. Additionally, several self-report studies suggest that about 40% of police officers abuse their spouse and children (Maher 2022). Since these are self-report studies, this data can be expected to be a severe undercount as well, and we have to expect the number of domestically abusing police officers to be far higher.

In conclusion, the accusations made by all three bands in their songs criticize a real-life problem with police in the United States. The songs might be from the last century but today's data shows that nothing has changed. Sexual violence is still a big problem in policing.

## **Discussion**

This is just an exceedingly small sample; there are many more songs criticizing police practices in the United States. A single song represents the experience of a single person or band but the number of songs criticizing the police is massive, especially since these are not the only genres to engage in this kind of criticism. Listening to these songs means to listen to the voices of the victims of policing in this country, whether or not the artists have ever been victims themselves or not, they are making the same allegations against the police statistics and actual victims make. One could argue that members of the rap and punk scene are repeatedly involved in criminal behavior in order to discard the criticism of the songs. However, the data used for this analysis show clearly that these songs are not just an artistic form of revenge for punishment, but they are mirroring reality.

In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon describes how colonial powers punish the oppressed people in their colony with sheer violence but when these people rose up, the colonialist nations were perplexed: How could it be that these “uncivilized” people turn so violent? If you treat a population with violence, its members grow up with this violence. It is the same for a community, if you send in the police as an occupying force and let them implement the law with violence, the people will at some point respond with violence. This is the core of the ineffectiveness of policing in the United States: Police violence will always incite violence as a response.

A main difference in the lyrics of the sample is that rap musicians

and groups focus more on deadly, racist violence while the punk texts are more holistic, pointing out other problems like sexual violence. Rap songs are more likely to talk about arming themselves for self-protection while punk bands tend to satirically put themselves in the role of the police officer. To fully understand the differences and commonalities of criticism of police by punk and rap, a bigger sample would be needed.

Appropriate changes are unlikely to happen in the immediate future. They didn't happen the last decades despite the public awareness of problems with policing and because blue interest groups, unions, officers and conservative politicians in both major parties in the US are blocking every progress. One major notable result of the BLM protests in the summer of 2020 was that police departments got \$750 million more for their budget, officially for racial bias training. If funding was actually used that way, is another question (Maher 2022). But the problem is that one can't teach officers during their training how to be a warrior, a part of the thin blue line between good and evil, and, on the other hand, that disproportionate violence is wrong. Police departments that have offered racial bias training are still involved in the killing of innocent people: The officer who killed George Floyd was an instructor in anti-bias training. Since 2009, the Madison Wisconsin PD offers an extensive anti-bias program. However, Tony Robinson, an unarmed Black man, was killed in 2015.

All these songs show that many people see the police as what they often actually are: a dangerous force of corruption, violence, sexual misconduct, oppression and even death. The kind of accusation



these songs make didn't change over the decades, and neither did related news: Rodney King, George Floyd, Laquan McDonald, Eric Garner, Breonna Taylor, Walter Scott, John Crawford III, and many more have been victims of police violence over the years. The songs, protests and riots of the last 50 years and beyond show that the problem of police brutality is neither new nor unknown to the public or to policy makers, yet no significant changes in policing have occurred. Violence is still the usual way for police to solve critical situations at the cost of human wellbeing and lives.

### **Conclusion**

This paper shows that the critiques by rap and punk artists should be taken seriously in accounting for the current situation of policing, racism or police brutality in the United States. They do not have the rigorous approach critical criminologists and other academics have, after all these are songs by artists, not analytical papers by scientists. They are not to be used as some kind of eyewitness testimony for singular acts of police misconduct. They are criticizing the problem as a whole.

Both scenes are predominantly from working class backgrounds but people who listened to these genres in the '90s and '80s are now active in different academic fields, meaning that the problem of police brutality has been known for decades and among all classes and races. I will give the last word in this discussion to the artists and end this paper with a quote by Body Count:

“All these people out here tripping off police brutality  
Like this shit is something new  
Give me a fucking break  
I've been talking about this shit for over 20 years”

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