

Overhaul the police? Or overhaul the community?



by Lev Tsitrin

I don't know what happens in a proverbial collision between the irresistible force and the immovable object, but I just learned what the *New York Times* thinks should happen when a police force comes into collision with a community it polices: the police force must yield and overhaul itself. It does not even begin to occur to the *New York Times* to consider the overhaul of the community as a proper solution.

I wonder why such should be the case; yet nowhere in the lengthy report titled "[*Riots in France Highlight a Vicious Cycle Between Police and Minorities*](#)" (and subtitled "Calls to overhaul the police go back decades. But violent episodes of police enforcement continue. So do violent outpourings on the street") is there even a hint that maybe the overhaul should go the other way around – the members of the community

learning to behave differently than they do?

Now, I am mindful that I am treading on a sacred ground here – we are talking not of any community, but that of “young men perceived to be Black or Arab.” And they “were 20 times more likely to be checked by the police than the rest of the population.”

Aha! This is racism!, cries the *New York Times* (or at least implies it). And indeed it looks that way – the report starts with a horror story of a “Mr. Luhaka, 22, a Black soccer player, [who] was cutting through a known drug-dealing zone in his housing project in a Paris suburb in 2017 when the police swept in to conduct identity checks. Mr. Luhaka was wrestled to the ground by three police officers, who hit him repeatedly and sprayed tear gas in his face” – causing a truly gruesome injury as a result. The *New York Times* does not go into great detail (per French [Wikipedia](#), Mr. Luhaka attempted to protect a drug dealer from an arrest) but only notes that as a result, “Mr. Luhaka’s housing project, and others around Paris, erupted in fury. He was held up as a symbol of what activists had been denouncing for years: discriminatory policing that violently targets minority youth, particularly in France’s poor areas.” The same scenario, according to the paper, unfolded more recently, “in the tumultuous aftermath of the killing in late June of Nahel Merzouk, 17, a French citizen of Algerian and Moroccan descent” (who was shot by a police officer whom he threatened to run over with a Mercedes he was driving).

The solution to all this? Naturally – overhaul the police. But how about overhauling the community? Why won’t that do the trick equally well? Why should it be natural to have “drug-dealing zones”? Why should it be OK to not be civil to the police – but to be confrontational?

After all, the French story contrasts with a [Belgian-Ukrainian story](#) of a more civil encounter with the police I read just

the other day: “It was 2019, and Zaluzhny, as one of Ukraine’s top commanders directing Kyiv’s forces against Russian proxies in eastern Ukraine, traveled to Brussels for a meeting with NATO counterparts. As soon as he stepped off the plane, he said, he was surrounded by law enforcement. With their guns pointed at him, he was instructed to lie facedown on the floor and was handcuffed. Zaluzhny said he had just enough roaming minutes on his phone to call Ukraine’s ambassador to NATO, who eventually helped secure his release. Russian authorities had placed Zaluzhny’s name on the Interpol wanted list without his knowing – a regular practice that has led to other Ukrainian commanders being briefly imprisoned.”

Did the police make a mistake? Yes. Would violent resistance – or emotion-filled talking back help? No. So what can you do? Just know that mistakes happen, that you are innocent, and calmly try to work it out.

Maybe this is what the members of the French “Black or Arab” community should learn to do, too – and assume that there may be a reason the police wants to talk to them? It may not be racism. It may well be speeding (as was the case with “Mr. Merzouk, 17”) or drug dealing (that Mr. Luhaka, 22, happened to step into). The Police is not necessarily the evil culprit (had George Floyd who was also mentioned in the article not been on drugs, and have not handed a fake \$20 to a cashier, his story (and that of the police officers who were accused of racism in fatally tackling him) would have been different, too). The community reaction should not follow what the *New York Times* calls a “well-worn French playbook. Youths ... protesting by setting cars on fire.”

So perhaps overhauling not the police, but the culture of the sacred “minorities” is in order? (And perhaps de-sacralizing them is a good idea, too?) While this thought does not occur to the *New York Times* – the only solution it mentions is the police overhaul – may be the overhaul of the culture of the minority “Black or Arab” communities, sacrilegious as it

sounds to our multicultural ear, is what actually needs to happen?