



# Minor narratives: Extrajudicial punishment of youth offenders by police officers in Portugal



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## ABSTRACT

Based on evidence collected during research in a youth detention centre in the city of Lisbon, the article discusses youth offenders' narratives of police violence. According to their reports, juvenile suspects are frequently arrested, questioned and, occasionally, subjected to different forms of physical and/or symbolic violence. The article discusses the youths' narratives, first on their own terms and, second, in view of other authors' findings, identifying different categories of violence based on the respective objective of the (ab)use of police force. It is suggested that, apart from serving outward ends like investigation, deference and "education", police violence is closely linked to concepts of citizenship, order and state authority. (Ab)use of force is further discussed as a form of collective punishment of "non-citizens" against a backdrop of performative crime control and governance of uncertainty on the margins of the state.

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## 1. Introduction: violence and the police

In his review of studies on police use of force and "The 'Causes' of Police Brutality" in the US, Worden (1996), draws the conclusion that "physical force is infrequently used by the police" and that "improper force is still less frequently used". Police brutality and the use of improper force, Worden affirms, are "rare in the sense that aircraft fatalities are rare", that is, "infrequent relative to the large volume of interactions between police and citizens" (1996: 58). Other authors however, based on in-depth ethnographic studies, have pointed to the systematic use and abuse of police violence, particularly on the fringes of society. Caldeira, for instance, relates that in 1999 police forces in São Paulo "were responsible for around 10 percent of the homicides of the metropolitan region" (2013: 106). The abuse of force by the military police (responsible for street patrolling), Caldeira affirms, "is one of the most intractable features of their behaviour" (2013: 106). Jauregui, to cite an example from the eastern hemisphere, recalls in her ethnography of policing in northern India how she was caught unawares by the regularity, frequency and "overwhelming banality of police violence". "On any given day", Jauregui notes, "one would see police of all ranks [...] shove persons' bodies into walls or other objects; slap people across the face; leave them bloody, black and blue from beatings; pull hair and ears and other appendages; stretch and step on limbs" (2013: 130).

It would be wrong, however, to jump to the conclusion that police violence is mainly a problem of so-called developing countries or "young" democracies. The recent shooting of an unarmed Afro-American youth in Ferguson, Missouri and other mediatized incidents have raised public awareness of abuse of police force in the USA, and made it apparent that its prevalence might well surpass that of aircraft fatalities. As Skolnick and Fyfe note, while "most of us have come to regard lynching

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as a baleful relic of a distant past, the sort of brutality we witnessed on the Rodney King videotape may not be so uncommon” (1993: 23–24). As far as European democracies are concerned, Fassin (2013) has recently described the quotidian arbitrariness of the use of force in his ethnography of anti-crime squads which operate in the suburbs of Paris.

From an empirical, qualitative research perspective, we still know relatively little about the conduct and misconduct of police forces around the world. While the police, as the executing agents of the state’s monopoly of violence, openly exhibit their readiness to use physical force legitimately, they generally have no interest in making visible abuse or excessive use of force as being a part of the routine of policing. The perceived “rareness” of police brutality, to use Worden’s expression, is partly a consequence of its belonging to the realm of invisible state action. The public becomes cognizant of the dark side of police work only if and to the extent that it is “accidentally” made visible, for instance, by means of surveillance cameras, mobile phones or dashcams, and broadcast or spread by social media. Artistic and journalistic projects that seek to augment the visibility of police violence by gathering and exposing evidence—like [objectsproject.org](http://objectsproject.org), [mappingpoliceviolence.org](http://mappingpoliceviolence.org), or “The Counted”, to name a few—give an idea of the, often unnoticed, endemic nature of police (ab)use of force.<sup>1</sup>

As far as Portugal is concerned, the unmotivated beating of a Benfica football fan by police officers in front of his children recently attracted some international attention. The incident was filmed and made it into the news of British and even US media, being quoted also in the 2015/16 report of Amnesty International.<sup>2</sup> From a non-journalistic perspective, the 2015 report on Human Rights Practices of the US Department of State refers to “credible reports of excessive use of force by police” (USDOS, 2015: 2), and the periodic report of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture quotes much evidence for the use of abusive force by police officers (CPT, 2013). In the course of my own research in neighbourhoods in the periphery of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area and two criminal courts, I learned of a large number of accounts of police abuse of force, mainly against young, economically disadvantaged citizens. Then again, Durão’s in-depth studies on Portuguese police culture likewise point to a number of situations during which officers of the Public Order Police (PSP) resorted to physical and/or symbolic violence during patrols or at the station.<sup>3</sup> To quote just one example, Durão narrates that during the 2004 UEFA European soccer championship in Lisbon:

various officers of police stations acquired expandable metal batons, based on the model of the officers of the riot police [*piquet*], where this instrument is provided for by the equipment plan. These batons are lighter and transportable, but also stronger and harder. A young [officer], referring to his baton, said that he hadn’t yet baptized it, that is, used it. Whereupon one [officer] of the riot police said to him: “Let’s go down there and seize some nigger [*preto*] or other. We’ll beat them up.”<sup>4</sup>

(Durão, 2006: 251–2)

In this article, I will discuss incidents of police violence as reported by the inmates of a youth detention centre in the city of Lisbon.<sup>5</sup> As John Comaroff has noted, to avoid the pitfalls of “abstract, generalized-yet-narrow conceptions of policing”, it is imperative to contrast ethnography and critical theory within a “dialectical methodology”, that is, reading “the empirical microscopy of everyday policing against the larger forces that give shape to it” (2013: xvii). In this sense, the following discussion of police (ab)use of force against youth offenders in Portugal is meant to contribute to the anthropology of policing by exposing the inherent logic of incidents of violence, and relating them to other authors’ observations and theories on the subject matter. While the case of Portugal is unique in its particular nature, the narratives of the youth offenders from Lisbon prove to be akin to accounts of police abuse of force from many other places. Notably, their narratives confirm the high prevalence of police violence against juvenile offenders and its quality as a form of extrajudicial punishment. By reading the youths’ narratives, first on their own terms and, second, comparatively and in view of theory, I seek to make the pervasiveness and dynamics of violence in youth–police encounters intelligible, both in their particularity and in regard to some of the characteristics of policing itself.

## 2. Methods and limitations

The narratives on police violence presented in this article are excerpts of interviews with sentenced juvenile offenders, conducted during three fieldwork periods of five weeks each over the course of a year in one of the six so-called “Educational Centres” operating in Portugal at the time of writing (see Zoettl, *forthcoming*). The centre where the research took place was home to a variable number of around 40 inmates (around a quarter of whom were female), interned mostly for offences such as muggings, burglary, bodily harm or small-scale drug trafficking. During the course of the research, semi-structured and audiotaped interviews were conducted in private with 24 inmates (18 male, 6 female), lasting from just over half an hour to

<sup>1</sup> All projects refer to police violence in the US. “The Counted” is hosted by the British newspaper *The Guardian*.

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/portugal/11617080/Footage-shows-Portuguese-police-beat-man-in-front-of-his-children.html> (accessed 20 May 2016) and AI (2016).

<sup>3</sup> Portuguese police forces are administratively divided into the Public Order Police (PSP) and the “judicial” police (Policia de Seguranca Pública and Policia Judiciária). The former are mainly responsible for street patrols and investigation of most criminal offences, while the latter’s responsibility is confined to the investigation of felonies and organized crime. Practically all reports of youths quoted here refer to the PSP.

<sup>4</sup> All quotes originally in Portuguese have been translated by the author. In the case of interviews, the translation sought to keep as close to the Portuguese original as possible, even where this resulted in rather awkward English versions.

<sup>5</sup> To protect the inmates’ anonymity, the centre’s name will not be given here.

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