The price of brutality

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No charges were filed against the police officer who shot 12-year-old Tamir Rice moments after arriving at a Cleveland park. His partner, who denied the wounded boy medical aid for crucial minutes, wasn't prosecuted either. Nor was any other law enforcement officer connected to Rice's senseless death in 2014.

But some people are being held responsible: the taxpayers of Cleveland. In April, a federal court awarded $6 million in civil damages to Rice's family and estate.

"The resolution is nothing to celebrate," noted the family's lawyer. He's right. While Rice's loved ones deserve every dime, it's a pale consolation for their loss. What's more, such payouts hurt city budgets, threatening the services so vital to the very citizens—disproportionately low-income and black—who bear the brunt of police brutality.

When a city has to pay out millions in damages for police misconduct, does it deter the use of excessive force? Criminal justice scholar Kami Chavis Simmons says it doesn't. The theory, she told *The Christian Science Monitor*, is that "the more you pay, the more careful you are." But in practice, "it doesn't seem to be a very effective tool." One study found that in 2010, the ten U.S. cities with the largest police forces paid $168.3 million in court judgments and settlements. By 2014, this number had gone up almost 50 percent. The money didn't curb the problems; the problems and the payouts just grew bigger.

Compensating victims is necessary, but it’s not a solution. A solution would involve tough consequences for cops who kill without cause and for higher-ups who protect them—as well as for officers with patterns of racially prejudiced behavior. Lots of factors make such reforms hard to achieve, from police union rules that hamper investigations to jurors’ tendency to find cops uniquely trustworthy. In Chicago, where a series of payouts to victims’ families have come against the backdrop of fiscal crisis, it took the shocking details of Laquan McDonald’s death to create pressure for even minor police reforms. There and elsewhere, major ones are required.

At a deeper level, what’s needed is a renewed vision of what it means for police to serve and protect. This means training in things like crisis intervention teams, a method for effective policing among people with mental illness that was pioneered in Memphis in the 1980s and has recently been taken up elsewhere. It means recovering the ideal of policing as keeping the peace, not just fighting crime.

Tamir Rice’s family won a lawsuit, but nobody wins when our system calls a death wrongful and then diffuses accountability to every taxpayer in town. If cops and departments persist in treating deadly force as a first resort rather than a last one, they should be the ones to face consequences—consequences serious enough to compel deep change.