



Episode 426: The Shocking Kill Rate of American Police

Guest: Edward Stringham

WOODS: This article of yours in the *New York Daily News* has gotten quite a bit of attention: "America's out-of-control cop kill rate." This being Episode 426, we'll be linking to it on today's show notes page, TomWoods.com/426 for people to read for themselves, but let's go into the thesis here. You begin by talking about the homicide rate in the U.S. Out of 100,000 people, the homicide rate is 5 per 100,000. So out of any given 100,000 Americans, 5 will be victims, and 5 will commit homicide. So that's our baseline number that we're using when then looking at the police. I had not seen anyone do this before, to compare this baseline homicide rate to the police homicide rate; we'll just put it that way. What did you find here? What is the number?

STRINGHAM: It's actually upwards of over 145 per 100,000, so we're talking about 30 times higher kill rate for the average officer than the average American.

WOODS: That's an unbelievable statistic.

STRINGHAM: Yeah, so we all hear the anecdotes in the media about police killing individual people. We don't often hear too much about the actual total numbers. The government doesn't really report their statistics of how many people they kill very accurately. But over the past couple of years, we've got some good data sources: KilledByThePolice.net, *The Washington Post* are starting to report that. So I figure, well, how many police are out there, and at what rate are they killing? If we look at 100,000 police, how many are they killing? And they're killing at far higher rates than most homicidal countries in the entire world.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, let's look at the situation elsewhere, because maybe this is just a problem with police all over the world.

STRINGHAM: Yeah.

WOODS: But what do we see in other countries when we do a comparative study?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, so we can compare the American police kill rate to the citizen kill rate. We talked about it being 5 per 100,000. In Europe, it's in most countries about 1 per 100,000 people. So we're talking about over 140 times higher kill rate of American police than the average citizen. The average citizen in the most dangerous countries,

Venezuela and Honduras, have homicide rates of 54 and 90 per 100,000. So we're looking at that, and the American police are killing at 1.5 or 2.5 times the rate of the people in the most dangerous countries. And then from there, we can talk about how it compares to police kill rates around the world, and it looks terrible there too.

WOODS: Yeah, so tell me about some of those. I'm looking at the figures right here in your article. Share them with the listeners.

STRINGHAM: Yeah, so in most European countries and elsewhere, there's a much lower police kill rate. So in places like England, they kill basically about 1 per 100,000 — or actually 1.6 per 100,000. In most other European countries, it's also less than 10 per 100,000. So we're talking about police kill rates, which are very much in line with the regular citizenry, whereas in the United States, it's magnitudes higher. And in certain countries — in Iceland, police have reportedly killed 1 person in their entire history, whereas, in the United States, they're killing 1,000 people per year, which is just a really high figure comparatively.

WOODS: Now, you've got in here — you try to handle the objection that some of these people who are killed by police are terrible people, and they deserve to be killed, and this is just a whole lot of bleeding heart nonsense to be worried about them. What do you say to that? Of course, part of the answer would have to be, well, how come there are so many more terrible people in the U.S. as compared to in other countries?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, I think it's a bogus argument for people to say that these victims deserved it. If you look at the high-profile cases of Michael Brown and Ferguson, he was shoplifting cigarillos, and that's certainly bad, but I don't think we want to commit the death penalty against this guy or drone him because he's stealing from a liquor store. Other people, Eric Garner in Staten Island was selling untaxed cigarettes, and that is illegal, but since when should we be calling things like that a capital punishment? And since when should we be giving the police the authority to be the judge, the jury, the executioner and to decide, okay, well this untaxed cigarette is really wrong; let me kill the person. And I think that's just so far from most people's conceptions of justice.

WOODS: What exactly can be done to deal with this? Of course, the response from Al Sharpton will be we need a federalized police force, and then the federal government will oversee the police, and that will solve the problem. I'm sure you're skeptical of a solution like that. Is there anything we can get from looking at other countries and what we might learn from them?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, so I'll tell you my ideal solution in a minute, but some really simple ones is to look at the other countries that, for example, do not arm the police. Plenty of countries do not arm the police. England is a prime example; New Zealand and Norway, we can go down the list. And the police kill rates are much, much lower there, so that's something that we can think about. We don't need the heavily militarized police that we have now carrying around surplus military equipment. It's just not a staple of society.

Other things we can look at is just questioning whether we need so many police. There are 700,000 police in America, and if you look on a per capita basis, plenty of countries have much fewer police. We're talking about 20% or 40% fewer police in places like Sweden. And they also have lower homicide rates. So the idea that we need this heavily armed, militarized police is something that I think we should start questioning.

WOODS: But wouldn't they say that it's because they have lower homicide rates that they don't need as many police, but we need more police because we have so many killers here?

STRINGHAM: Well, a lot of the crime that we have today, one could argue, is created by the police. Things like the victimless crime laws, persecution of teen pool parties, all these things that the government does to arrest drug users, it's actually destabilizing communities; it's putting whole hosts of people in jail; it's preventing people from raising their children. And all of that, I would argue, is bad for society and actually leads to increases in crime. So we need to question the assumption that more police are there to protect us; they're there to lower crime. And in many cases, they're actually increasing problems.

WOODS: Okay, continuing along the devil's advocate line, somebody might say that there are certain American cities, portions of American cities that are extremely unsafe, much more unsafe than any Norwegian city, and that nobody in his right mind would want to walk into these neighborhoods unarmed, much less a policeman who's trying to enforce the law. This would, if they were not armed, this would mean de facto that there simply won't be police service in those areas.

STRINGHAM: Well, there was a great article in the *Wall Street Journal* a couple of months ago pointing out that as a practical matter, from a de facto matter, yes, huge percentages of African American communities are simply not policed when it comes to enforcing important laws, such as laws against murder and things like that. They talk about how it's much easier for the police to focus on petty things, victimless crimes, drug crimes, and patrol at the periphery instead of actually going in there and getting their hands dirty. So the idea that African American communities are being policed in a way that's protecting individual rights is something we should question. If we look at the average satisfaction of African Americans of the police, it's much lower, and I think that's indicative that the police are actually in many cases harassing the citizenry – in 1,000 cases last year, killing the citizenry – rather than actually protecting the citizenry.

WOODS: In getting to what your ideal solution would be, we have to raise the issue of your new book, which I understand is coming out this month. We had you on in the past with a kind of sneak preview of the book, *Private Governance*, published by Oxford University Press, so it's coming out this month, June 2015.

STRINGHAM: It's out right now. I just got my books in the mail yesterday, so buy it now. Buy your 10 copies; give it to everybody you know.

WOODS: All right, well we are going to link to it at TomWoods.com/426; that's today's show notes page. What's the subtitle of that book?

STRINGHAM: It's *Private Governance: Creating Order in Economic and Social Life*. And I go through and talk about how the order that exists in the world today, in tons of places we can look at, it's very clear; it's not attributable to government. Rather, it's attributable to certain private factors, all the way from things like personal morality up until things like private security, private police. And I think these are alternatives, much more effective alternatives, than relying on a government bureaucracy, government monopoly over the use of force.

WOODS: Well, before we get to the big punch line – I don't want people to tune out now if I were to mention this later – you have another piece of good news from right around the same time, and that is your new academic position. And I'd just like you to share that good news with the listeners. And then we'll get into how do we solve this police problem.

STRINGHAM: Thanks, Tom. Yeah, I just got an endowed chair – Davis-Endowed Professor of Economic Organizations and Innovation at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. It's one of the most highly and well endowed chairs for private enterprise in the entire world. So I'm really thrilled to be working there with Gerald Gunderson, with Bill Butos, and many other great scholars to talk about the importance of private enterprise for society.

WOODS: And speaking of which, how do you deal with the police problem? This is not going to be an episode that ends with, well, you know, I've got three minor reforms that will nibble around the edges. What's the Ed Stringham reform?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, I think we need to start looking at private police. Private police already exist in large parts throughout history and to some extent in modern day society. And I think we can view that as a model, which is much better than the coercive and monopolized government police.

So I'll give you just a couple quick examples. In the history of San Francisco, during the Gold Rush, there were hardly any police, so merchants hired police. They still have these people around today; they're referred to as the Patrol Special Police. And they're much more responsive to protecting people's property, rather than harassing the citizenry.

I'll give you another couple examples. The state of North Carolina is one area where it's possible to have a fully deputized private police throughout the entire state to protect the property of those people who hire them. So they're often called company police or railroad police, and the most common of these that most people would have seen before are university police. So at Duke University, they're fully deputized private police, and they are a larger department than 99% of American government police departments nationwide. So a major difference between them is that they don't have the same incentives to harass the students. They don't have the same incentives to

basically bully their subjects. Whereas, the private police are paid for by an entity that cares about protecting the property and the well-being of the customer, and I think that's a much better model.

WOODS: You know, it's not directly related to the article, but somewhat: the subject of private prisons has come up, and we get a lot of progressives writing about the horrors of private prisons, and they say that this gives the whole system an incentive to arrest people, because then the private prisons can make a profit on them and this and that. But I wonder if the problem there is that the reason that so many of these people are being arrested is for victimless crimes, so these so-called private prisons are really operating in a government system that has already distorted what a real prison population would look like.

STRINGHAM: Yeah, I think you're exactly right. I think the term private prison is very misleading and a misnomer, because it really should be referred to as government-funded prison that is populated by people who are arrested by government that are mandated to be in there by government judges. And so almost every step of the way, the government is the group deciding to have that prison, deciding how many people are going to be in there, how long they're going to be in there.

And yeah, there are private people working for the government and there's also, in this case, private contracting companies who are working for the government, but I think it's misleading to refer to that as a private system. They're simply employees of the government. In this case, they're a contracted out employee of the government. And yes, it's terrible; it's coercive; I'm against it. But that needs to be emphasized, that it's a governmental system rather than a private one.

WOODS: In terms of private police, you can imagine opponents saying things like private police would not be responsive to the needs of the people; they would just be thinking about wherever their money's coming from. And a lot of these vulnerable communities aren't going to have a lot of money, so maybe these police would not be helpful for them. And the funny thing about this objection would be that it sounds like they're describing the current system.

STRINGHAM: (laughing) Exactly, I was going to say that. I argue the exact opposite, that it is very clear that low-income communities are not served by the government police. It's very clear – you could ask them; there are tons of surveys on this of different demographics who live in inner cities are extremely unhappy with the government police, who do not care about protecting their property rights and making them safe. So that's definitely true.

We can now contrast this with the incentives of a private system. And a private system, you can have one for rich people; you can have one for poor people. It's not about money. There have been examples of private community groups wanting to organize voluntary patrol groups in their housing projects, and the government comes in and says, no, you can't do that; we're protecting this; we're keeping you safe. So

there's a clear example of the government actively prohibiting basically neighborhood watches, self policing.

In addition, you can have plenty of businesses who are providing services to people at zero cost. So in New York City, there are plenty of business improvement districts, where you have unarmed private security, and people walk around and patrol the areas, and these are being provided for free at not cost to the user, the people who are walking by. But it's paid for by the businesses. So if you're a business, if you're a landlord, if you're a hotel, you're going to want to privately finance this so-called public good, and then provide it for free to anybody who is passing by.

WOODS: I mean, think of it as what would happen, for example, inside a hotel or inside Disney World. I don't pay an extra policing fee to the hotel; it's included in the package. It's something they would want to provide for me. And likewise, if I'm passing through a business district, you know, like, as I'm walking, even if the business people laid down the sidewalks, I'm not paying a sidewalk fee. They want there to be sidewalks, so that I'll walk by their businesses and go in and buy something. Well, likewise, they don't want me to be killed instantly when I walk down the street, so therefore they're going to want to have unobtrusive police. For example, when you're at Disney World, you feel completely safe, and yet, you don't see a security person anywhere. But yet, you know somehow they're doing it.

STRINGHAM: That's exactly right. So they're bundling what mainstream economists call public goods; they're bundling them with private goods and maximizing the experience for the user. And Disney's a great example that you bring up – I love to talk about that; I talk about that in my book, as well – where it's very much behind the scenes.

Same thing with Las Vegas, very much behind the scenes. They've got lots and lots of security, but they're not there committing police abuse. They're not there committing police brutality against the guests, because that's bundled with the other private goods, which are entrance to the park or entertainment in the casino. And so they're there in a way to maximize the well-being of the customer.

Government police, on the other hand, have totally different incentives. They have incentives maybe to impose power, maybe to engage in civil asset forfeiture – a lot of things that people really have no ability to say no to, because they're hired by the bureaucracy, and they're pretty much out of control.

WOODS: In a residential part of a city, though, maybe it's harder for people to envision how this might work. You mentioned voluntary patrols, but where there aren't big businesses that would have an interest in providing these services, how else might people do this? Do they subscribe? Are they going to get protection if they can't afford to pay for it? I mean, these would be the common objections.

STRINGHAM: Yeah, so in San Francisco, one of the more interesting examples of private policing throughout our history are the Patrol Special Police. They were fully deputized up until the 1990s. They have since lost some of their powers, but they still

have the ability to patrol multiple properties, so unlike stationary security guards, which have to stay at one property, the Patrol Special Police in San Francisco patrol multiple properties. They also can be armed; they're the only group of private parties who can be armed in San Francisco for policing. And they will be paid for by different merchants. They'll go and ask any individual store, would you like to subscribe to my services. One might say yes; the other might say no. And in the process, they are providing what mainstream economists would be called spillover benefits, including to non-payers.

To get to the specifics of private residential communities, yeah, there are entire neighborhood groups who will say, we want to hire a private security from the Patrol Special Police, which is a network of independent firms. And they'll hire somebody from one of these companies to police and patrol the neighborhood. So in this case, it could be done by a business group who's helping sponsor the neighborhood, or it could be done through individual contributions, and that's really been working well.

I did a survey of the customers of these people: why do you go ahead and pay for something when the government police provide this for free? And the responses were great; they would be unbelievable like, "This is a joke, right? You really think that I have trust in the government police?" "They don't respond." "They scare me." And just going through the list of things that an economist from a free market perspective might have predicted, that's exactly what happens. Government bureaucracies are not responsive to individuals where the private people are, and people are willing to pay for that even when the government is providing so-called free services.

WOODS: And are you on Twitter?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, you can follow me on Twitter, @EdStringham.

WOODS: I just want to make sure of that, because I'll put that on today's show notes page as well. Do you have a personal website?

STRINGHAM: Yeah, it's EdwardPeterStringham@wordpress.com, and you can search for that on the Internet as well.

WOODS: Okay, so I'll actually make it easier on people; we'll put all those things so that people can follow you at TomWoods.com/426. We'll have a link to *Private Governance*, your book; to your site; to Twitter; everything we've talked about – the article we talked about – all this stuff will be at TomWoods.com/426. Ed, thanks for coming back on today, and best of luck with the book and the new position.

STRINGHAM: Thanks so much, Tom; thanks for all the great that you do.