

The Matter of Child Lives: Police Violence and the Limits of Children's Rights¹

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On January 29, 2021, in Rochester, New York, three adult police officers handcuffed and pepper-sprayed a 9-year-old Black girl before forcing her into a police car.² As the girl refused to get into the car, resisting and screaming for her father, one of the police officers was caught on body camera chastising her, "You're acting like a child." The girl immediately responded, "I am a child!" Police were dispatched to a domestic dispute before they encountered the girl. Her pepper spraying and being forced into the police car follows a series of more tragic cases in the United States, including that of 12-year-old Tamir Rice, who was shot and killed by the police in Cleveland for playing with a toy gun, and 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, who was simply walking in a Florida neighborhood when he was violently assaulted and killed by a community watchman. Like these cases, the incident in Rochester garnered condemnation against the police officers. Black Lives Matter protests denouncing systemic police violence quickly erupted in the aftermath of the video releases, and the three police officers involved have been suspended.

Without any prospects of police reform soon, the case in Rochester raises broader questions about childhood and the police, both in the United States and abroad. My anthropological research in Cairo, Egypt parallels the situation in Rochester in unexpected and illuminating ways. In Egypt, as we have seen in the United States, being a child is an unstable designation, particularly when it comes to policing. Police reform, therefore, is a matter that impacts child lives as much as those of adults.

While in Cairo during two years (2007-2009) of ethnographic research on global healthcare with children, I worked in a French-based aid organization that ran a mobile medical clinic for "street children," a category the organization defined as people under the age of eighteen who live or work on the streets for protracted periods of time (Sweis 2017a). While in this clinic, I observed and interviewed local Egyptian medical aid workers and child patients during routine medical encounters. The organization defined Egyptian street children according to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and universal children's rights discourse. These doctrines promote a Western, modern, middle-class model of the child that paints a "child" as inherently apolitical, undeveloped, and lacking personal agency. The model assumes that childhood is a life phase marked by protection and play, not work or politics. In Cairo, one of the organization's main goals was to ensure the local police approached young people who lived or worked on the streets as "children"—that is, according to children's rights, as innocent subjects who were dependent on adults and who required compassion, not punishment. While this approach was seemingly benevolent, it also obscured the many ways in which children acted as social and political

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² From "Three Rochester police officers are removed from patrol after a 9-year-old girl is handcuffed and pepper-sprayed." Ray Sanchez and Mirna Alsharif. *CNN*, Tuesday, February 2, 2021.

agents, particularly with respect to state violence and the police. As time went by in the clinic in Cairo, I learned how central the state and, in particular, police violence, were in the lives of child patients. This routine violence included handcuffing, intimidation, detention, and physical and sexual abuse on par with what adults experienced in prison.

A key lesson I learned from my fieldwork in the clinic is that although rights-based discourse framed the children as agentless, our patients resisted what they saw as unjust treatment by the police in an assortment of ways. From small acts of resistance to participating in mass demonstrations—as Egyptian children did during the mass protests of 2011 (Diana 2021)—they made their own calls for social justice. For example, one teenage clinic patient proudly flashed a series of razor blade scars on his chest once he entered the clinic. He claimed that he cut himself in order to bleed in front of police officers and thereby avoid detention. He had used his body as a “rhetorical devise” (Cox 2015), in harmful ways as a means of resistance because for him, self-inflicted wounds were a better fate than detention. Such resistance practices trouble our romanticized notion of protected childhood and urge us to question how children’s rights, which depoliticize children and promote agentless childhood, figure into police and structural violence.

The young patients I encountered in Cairo made decisions for themselves that maximized their safety, sense of independence, and personal dignity. The paradox of their situation is that the rights-based healthcare we were providing them did nothing to alter the ongoing police violence in their lives and the ways that violence shaped their health. Patients recognized this and understood that institutions like the state repeatedly violated their bodies. Like the 9-year-old girl in Rochester, New York, they openly resisted by confronting police, talking back, and even challenging state power using their bodies.

Childhood is a slippery concept, as scholars across disciplines have shown for decades (Ariès 1962; Malkki 2010; Marshall 2014; Stephens 1995; Sweis 2017b). There is much to be learned from the slippages that are present in conceptions of childhood in contemporary Egypt and the United States. A question remains: When is the Western model of “childhood” deployed, and for whom? For Black children in the United States and street children in Cairo, modern Western childhood is not a universally applied category. Historian Crystal Webster (2021) recently argued that the tendency in the United States has been to “adultify” Black children while ascribing childhood—as well as innocence and social protection—to White children. This means that Black children can be objects of police violence, while White children can play cops and robbers with guns without fear of getting shot themselves. Similarly, in Cairo, where Western-based aid organizations attempt to promote children’s rights among “street children,” young people continue to face the same militarized police as adults.

As we have seen with the case of the 9-year-old girl in Rochester, and as my research subjects in Cairo revealed, we can conceive of some young people as children—as dependent and innocent subjects—when the police do not. It is critical we understand these dueling definitions and recognize when each is deployed and why. Despite young people’s resistance, the slippages between childhood and adulthood could lead to terror, violence, and even death for them.

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