The issue of police brutality has clearly captured the public's attention in recent times. This form of police deviance, perhaps more than any other, has produced public outrage and calls for police reform. What were once isolated acts of deviance between police and unfortunate citizens have now become media events open to public display and scrutiny. In the period of one year alone, the public was exposed to several video tapes that showed police brutalizing citizens. The actions of half a dozen police officers in Kansas City, Missouri were recorded by a television news crew's cameras. Police were filmed using a stun gun repeatedly to shock a young man who had failed to stop his vehicle when confronted by police. As the young man was shocked by one officer, others beat him with night sticks. In Fort Worth, Texas a citizen parked along an interstate filmed a police officer beating a handcuffed prisoner who seemed to be offering little in the way of resistance. In Trenton, New Jersey the elderly father of a young African-American man inquired as to the reason his son was being arrested. Police responded by repeatedly slapping him in the face and shoving him up against a police cruiser. These and other images of police exceeding the legal limits of their lawful authority have caused a resurgence in public concern over use of force.
In the history of policing, perhaps no single episode of police brutality has generated as much attention and public reaction as the beating of motorist Rodney G. King at the hands of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD). The nation's attention was focused on the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War when the savage beating of Rodney King took place March 3, 1991 in Los Angeles, California. Although many of the facts of the LAPD beating of Rodney King are now well known, we will look more closely at the context in order to understand how this form of police deviance can flourish and even become accepted in some police subcultures. In this chapter, we analyze the King case from several different perspectives in order to explore the many facets of police brutality.

**The Police Beating of Rodney King**

From the balcony of his apartment, amateur video camera enthusiast, George Holliday, captured footage of LAPD officers beating a twenty-five year-old, unemployed, African-American man following a traffic stop. The event began at about 12:40 a.m. Sunday when California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers Melanie Singer and Timothy Singer, a husband and wife team, detected Rodney King's white Hyundai speeding on the Foothill freeway. King's vehicle apparently approached the CHP car from the rear and ultimately passed it. The CHP cruiser left the interstate, but returned to pace King's vehicle. King was accompanied in his vehicle by two of his friends, Bryant Allen and Freddie Helms, both African Americans. The CHP officers reportedly tried to signal
King to stop by activating their emergency equipment, but King failed to stop his vehicle. Instead, King continued to drive for several more miles allegedly running a stop sign and passing through a red light. King later explained he was fearful that a traffic ticket would result in his probation being revoked. King was on a two-year probationary period for a robbery conviction.

Meanwhile, CHP officials notified the LAPD that they were attempting to stop the vehicle but never mentioned over the police radio that it was traveling at a high rate of speed. Eventually, a LAPD patrol car assigned to Officers Laurence W. Powell and Timothy Wind, a cruiser assigned to LAPD Officers Theodore J. Briseno and Rolando Solano as well as a cruiser from the Los Angeles Unified School District Police (LAUSDP) became involved in the pursuit. Following what CHP officials initially called a high speed pursuit, said to have reached speeds of 110 to 115 miles per hour, King pulled his vehicle curbside at Foothills and Osborne in Lake View Terrace and was ordered out of his car. In the meantime, police from several agencies converged on the scene. According to the Christopher Commission's investigation "11 additional LAPD units (including a helicopter) with 21 officers arrived at the end-of-pursuit scene. " The two passengers complied with police orders to exit the vehicle and were taken into custody with little resistance. The unarmed King initially refused to exit the vehicle. When he did, he was twice shocked with a fifty thousand volt Taser by LAPD Sgt. Stacey Koon, allegedly hit in the head "baseball style" with nightsticks by Officers Powell and Wind; and repeatedly
kicked by Officer Briseno. In all, Rodney King was struck at least fifty-six times by the LAPD officers. At least twenty-one officers and as many as twenty-seven, including LAPD supervisor Stacey Koon, four uniformed members of the CHP, four LAPD field training officers, and several officers from different law enforcement agencies stood watching or participated in the beating. Two minutes later, Rodney King was lying crumpled on the ground with eleven skull fractures, a broken cheek bone, a fractured eye socket, a broken ankle, missing teeth, kidney damage, external burns and permanent brain damage. He was later lodged in jail where he remained for four days until prosecutors determined that there was insufficient evidence to try him for attempting to evade the police.

The Aftermath of the Beating

On the following day, March 4, 1991, George Holliday attempted to surrender his videotape of the beating to LAPD officials. Holliday was informed by a desk sergeant that the department was not interested in the tape and no attempt was made to learn about the beating he had witnessed. "Confronted with what he viewed as disinterest on the part of the LAPD, Holliday made arrangements with Los Angeles television station KTLA to broadcast the videotape Monday evening. On Tuesday, the tape received national exposure on the Cable News Network; thereafter, the incident was reported widely in the media. The tape was repeatedly played by major television networks in the United States and was eventually aired internationally. George Holliday's videotape, the initial disinterest
and dismissal of Holliday by the LAPD, and the exposure the video received from the news media enabled the nation to witness one of the worst abuses of police power ever captured on film.

Eleven days after the beating of Rodney King, four of the LAPD officers (Koon, Powell, Wind and Briseno) were indicted (March 14, 1991) by a Los Angeles County grand jury on state assault charges. A change of venue was granted the officers because of a court of appeals ruling that they could not receive a fair trial in Los Angeles County given the publicity surrounding the videotape. The trial site was then moved to Simi Valley in Ventura County, a predominately conservative, middleclass, white community of one hundred thousand. Besides being predominately white, Simi Valley is the home to many police officers and firefighters. As one police commander put it "any panel chosen from there was more likely to identify with the four white officers who had held the nightsticks than the one black man on the ground".

The trial began on March 4, 1992, and the fate of the four LAPD officers was in the hands of ten whites, one Asian, and one Hispanic. The racial composition of the jury was perhaps not as telling as their backgrounds. "The panel included a maintenance worker, a printer, a retired teacher and a retired real estate broker. Three of the jurors had worked as security guards or patrol officers in the U.S. military. Three others were members of the National Rifle Association. One was the brother of a retired L.A. police sergeant. By the time the case came to trial, Freddie Helms had died in a traffic accident. The other passenger in the King vehicle, Bryant Allen, could provide little information because he was held
by police at gun point prone on the ground. On April 29, 1992, after four days of deliberation, the jury handed down its decision acquitting the defendant-officers of all but a single charge against Powell. Within hours of the jury's decision to acquit the officers, Los Angeles was besieged with violence. The riots lasted five days and resulted in more than 50 deaths, 2,382 injuries, 5,200 destroyed or damaged buildings, 40,000 lost jobs, an estimated $1 billion in property damage and more than 5,633 citizens arrested. Analysis following the riots indicated that "while there can be little doubt that the anger felt by black people concerning the Rodney King verdict provided the spark that started the riot, there is considerable evidence that by the next day, April 30, the riot had spread well beyond the bounds of race. Not only did the participation in rioting spread into other racial groups, it quickly spread to other cities including, Atlanta, Seattle and Madison, Wisconsin. President George Bush called out the military to establish order in L.A., and police across the country arrested thousands. The riots were among the most devastating ever experienced. During the course of the state trial, officials from the justice Department were conducting an investigation into the possibility that the four officers had violated Rodney King's civil rights. On August 5, 1992 federal prosecutors announced that the officers had been indicted on civil rights violation charges. Koon, Powell, Wind and Briseno were to stand trial again-this time in federal court. Sergeant Stacey Koon was charged with failing to prevent his officers from assaulting Mr. King; Powell, Wind and Briseno were charged with the assault. The
federal jury consisted of six white men, three white women, an African American man, an African-American woman, and a Hispanic man. The federal trial began on February 3, 1993 with the officers facing the possibility of ten-year sentences and $250,000 in fines. The jury spent six weeks listening to 61 witnesses, studying more than 100 exhibits. The day before Easter, the jury began its deliberations. After several days of consideration, it decided that Koon and Powell were guilty of the charges but that Wind and Briseno were not guilty. In August, the two officers were sentenced to thirty months in federal prison—a term that was significantly less than that required under the federal sentencing guidelines. They are appealing their conviction.

While it is important to understand the factual scenario surrounding the police beating of motorist Rodney King and what occurred in the aftermath of the beating, it is equally important to consider the social, cultural and occupational contexts in which these law enforcement officers operated. In the sections to follow, consideration is given to the organizational and cultural environment in which LAPD officers worked by drawing upon information uncovered by the Christopher Commission's investigation of the LAPD, the facts that surfaced at the state and federal trials of the officers involved, information gleaned from comments made to news reporters by police officials, and from Chief Daryl F. Gates' autobiography.

**The LAPD's Working Environment**

Daryl F. Gates had been chief of police for thirteen years at the time of the beating of Rodney King. He
had spent more than forty-two years working in the LAPD and had moved up through the ranks to become chief. Clearly, Chief Gates was in a position of power that most modern day police administrators would envy. He had almost absolute authority over the department, its policies, and its personnel; his position was well insulated by unique civil service protections.

Although the City Charter assigns the Police Commission ultimate control over Department policies, its authority over the Department and the Chief of Police is illusory. Structural and operational constraints greatly weaken the Police Commission's power to hold the Chief accountable and therefore its ability to perform its management responsibilities, including effective oversight. Real power and authority reside in the Chief.

The Christopher Commission noted that Gates' civil service status protected him from either disciplinary action or discharge by giving him a "substantial property right" in his job and declaring that he could not be suspended or removed except for "good and sufficient cause. Even the actions of the city's Police Commission could be vetoed by the city council or undermined by the chief.

Gates had a colorful career as chief of the LAPD, often bringing national attention to both himself and the police department. During his tenure as chief, Gates was credited with establishing an image of professionalism for the LAPD. More often than not, Gates' brand of professionalization focused on the creation of specialized tactical units, the adoption of high technology and military hardware, and the indoctrination of police personnel with aggressive attitudes.
"In 1967, Daryl F. Gates, a rising star in the Los Angeles Police Department, approached his chief with an idea: create an elite squad of officers, specially trained and equipped to respond to hostage situations. He wanted to call it SWAT, or Special Weapons Attack Team. Since his idea came in the aftermath of the Watts riots, image was important and the suggested name was modified to "Special Weapons and Tactics Team." Under Gates' command, the department changed from .38 caliber revolvers to 9mm weapons to "match the firepower on the streets; helicopters were used for assistance in vehicular and foot pursuits; motorized battering rams (tanks) were purchased to make forcible entries into citizen's homes; and the department began to use elite felony squads dubbed "Death Squads" because of the extraordinary number of suspects they killed. During the 1970s, the LAPD had an "intelligence squad" that regularly spied on L.A. citizens-despite the fact that they were not engaged in illegal activities. Adoption of these technologies and practices led to an avalanche of civil rights litigation and a feeling by many that Gates "set an improper moral tone for the department and sent the message that, when it comes to fighting crime, virtually anything goes. In fact, Lou Reiter, a former deputy chief in the LAPD, said that Gates "definitely had his own set ways . . . If your [sic] not with him, you're against him. There is a form-the-wagons-in-a-circle, siege mentality, but that's always been the case in LAPD. Although these innovations contributed to an external image of the LAPD as a professional organization, they actually served as a veneer for an aggressive police organization that had rapidly distanced itself from the
public. While developing as many specialized units as possible and securing as many military gadgets and tactics as the city would allow, Gates instilled a sense of division between the police and public. Because of his civil service protection, Gates was able to express openly his distorted views on minorities, crime and proper police practices. On more than one occasion, Gates antagonized certain segments of the community with his comments. In remarks to the press, Gates consistently demonstrated his insensitivity to minority segments of the population.

In 1978, after becoming chief, Gates attended a luncheon of the Coalition of Mexicanos/Latinos Against Defamation and was asked about the LAPD's failure to employ and promote appropriate numbers of Hispanic officers; Gates simply replied that Hispanics are "lazy" and told a story to illustrate the point. Four years later when besieged with questions about police use of a controversial choke hold that resulted in the deaths of at least sixteen citizens-most of whom were African American, Gates responded that "the veins or arteries [of African Americans] do not open up as fast as they do on normal people. In other episodes, Gates called a female news broadcaster an "Aryan broad"; he accused the Soviet Union of sending "Jewish spies" into the city to disrupt the Olympics; and when questioned on television about his views on homosexuals, he said that he was not biased. In fact, he stated in a "60 Minutes" interview that he "admired the upper-body strength of lesbians."

It should be noted that Gates, as chief of police, was responsible for providing police service for a city with a substantial gay population. The city, moreover, was made up
of 40 percent Latinos, 37 percent Whites, 13 percent African Americans and 10 percent Asians. Gates' distorted views on crime control and criminal justice were reflected in many of his remarks. In 1990 while addressing the Senate Judiciary Committee on the topic of drug control, Gates told Senator Joseph Biden that "the casual drug user ought to be taken out and shot. In a television documentary about police chiefs, Gates told interviewers that inmates should be given water, a few seeds and shovels, and left in the desert to make it on their own. Desert prisons, according to Gates, should be surrounded with explosive mines.

In another incident that involved a lawsuit against Chief Gates and members of the LAPD arising out of an act of police violence, Gates showed his disdain for the legal system. After testifying in the civil case, Gates was questioned by reporters outside the courtroom. The substance of the interviews appeared in three newspaper articles. The quotations varied minimally and the content of his statements was corroborated by all three newspapers. According to the federal court's records Gates said: "How much is a broken nose worth?"

"$90,000? I don't think it's worth anything. He's probably lucky that's all he has."

"Given the circumstances in this case, I don't think it's worth anything. [Larez] is probably lucky that's all he had broken."

"They [the jurors] see the family there all cleaned up . . . They don't know their background, that there is a gang member on parole. They get very sympathetic."

"I tell my officers to do something-and we do something and they give them $90,000. Gates' ideology was not just rhetoric; it was manifested in
LAPD practices. As the Christopher Commission noted, LAPD rewarded its officers for aggressive practices and measured productivity in terms of the number of calls answered by police and the number of citizens arrested. Officers were promoted and received pay increases for arresting citizens rather than for preventing crime. In the mid-1970s, Gates was involved in the development of the CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums). It had originally been called TRASH (Total Resources Against Street Hoodlums), but image was apparently considered in this instance. In 1988, he initiated Operation Hammer sending waves of over one thousand police officers onto the streets to make arrest sweeps. He later joked with other chiefs that this was a "cultural awareness" program. "We have a motto," said Gates, "Travel is broadening. Just get the hell out of Los Angeles. In all, through both organizational action and public comments, Gates set the stage for police violence by articulating a philosophy of bigotry and police aggression. Gates instilled in his personnel a "siege mentality" that informed officers who the criminals were and how they should be treated. When Gates' philosophy of aggressive policing was called into question, several common justifications were provided to appease citizens. First, the LAPD was understaffed; there were simply too few police for such a large city. Second, the police were out-manned and out-gunned by a swelling tide of crime and criminals entering Los Angeles. Third, these two factors meant that LAPD had to do more with less and that they had to take an aggressive approach to control crime. These justifications were
also advanced by the Christopher Commission's uncritical review of statistics. The Christopher Commission noted that: While the overall rate of violent crime in the United States increased three and one-half times between 1960 and 1989, the rate in Los Angeles during the same period was more than twice the national average. According to 1986 data recently published by the Police Foundation, the Los Angeles police were the busiest among the officers in the nation's largest six cities .... Of the police departments of the six largest United States cities, the LAPD has the fewest officers per resident and the fewest officers per square mile. Yet the LAPD boasts more arrests per officer than other forces. The facts seem clear: the LAPD had more crime and fewer officers than several major cities in the United States. The important omission in this justification, however, is that Gates was the chief of police for over thirteen years during this crime wave and his aggressive crime control tactics had obviously done little to stem the rising tide of crime. In fact, LAPD officers killed more citizens per officer in 1986 than did police in the other major cities and had the highest rate of citizen arrests. If the rate of crime is a valid measure of police performance, the LAPD saw over a decade of failure under Chief Gates—even with aggressive patrol tactics. Furthermore, the staffing of the LAPD is not a blind or capricious act, it is a policy decision and function of government. In short, the city chose not to hire more police officers but to provide them with the latest military hardware and to allow them to pursue aggression as their major crime control tactic. Given the number of civil rights claims filed against the LAPD (3,716 non-traffic-related claims in
five years), the cost of judgments, settlements and jury verdicts (over $20 million in four years), and cases of excessive force litigated (over 300 in four years) one can only infer that the city was willing to pay the price of police aggression.

**Aberration Conduct or Subculture of Violence?**

Almost immediately following the viewing of the videotaped beating of Rodney King, Chief Gates said that the incident "sickened" him but that, "Even if we determine the officers were out of line, its an aberration" and not a routine part of the way LAPD officers police the community. Eventually, Gates made a public apology-in which he apologized for beating up a "criminal." Most facts lead to the conclusion that the Rodney King beating was not a mere aberration as characterized by Gates. As Jerome H. Skolnick and James J. Fyfe observed, "Two cops can go berserk, but twenty cops embody a subculture of policing." Consider the evidence uncovered by the Christopher Commission concerning the LAPD's response to officer brutality:

There is a significant number of LAPD officers who repetitively misuse force and persistently ignore the written policies and guidelines of the Department regarding force. The evidence obtained by the Commission shows that this group has received inadequate supervisory and management attention. Former Assistant Chief Jesse Brewer testified that this lack of management attention and accountability is the "essence of the excessive force problem .... We know who the bad guys are. Reputations become well known, especially to the sergeants and then of course to lieutenants and the
captains in the areas . . . But I don't see anyone bring these people up . . . ." Assistant Chief David Dotson testified that "we have failed miserably" to hold supervisors accountable for excessive force by officers under their command. Interviews with a large number of present and former LAPD officers yield similar conclusions.

The Commission's examination of citizen complaints against the police found a remarkable pattern of use of excessive force by a violent subculture within the LAPD.

- Of approximately 1,800 officers against whom an allegation of excessive force or improper tactics was made from 1986 to 1990, more than 1,400 had only one or two allegations. But 183 officers had four or more allegations. Forty-four had six or more, 16 had eight or more, and one had 16 such allegations.

- Of nearly 6,000 officers identified as involved in use of force reports from January 1987 to March 1991, more than 4,000 had fewer than five reports each. But 63 officers had 20 or more reports each. The top 5% of the officers (ranked by number of reports) accounted for more than 20% of all reports.

Even in the face of such data, top administrators of the LAPD did little to correct the problem. In fact, a review of the personnel records of LAPD officers found that supervisors ignored problem officers and often attempted to characterize performance in the most favorable light. An investigation into the personnel records of the LAPD found that . . . of the 44 officers identified from the LAPD database who had six or more allegations of excessive force or improper tactics for the period 1986 through 1990 . . . the picture conveyed was often
incomplete and at odds with contemporaneous comments appearing in complaint files. As a general matter, the performance evaluation reports for those problem officers were very positive, documenting every complimentary comment received and expressing optimism about the officer's progress in the Department. What emerges from such statistics is a department where the use of force against citizens is not considered a matter of great concern. In fact, officer Lawrence Powell testified that before going on patrol the evening of the King beating, he was "encouraged to be `more aggressive' with baton blows in situations where such force was used."

Considerable evidence also indicated that members of the LAPD internalized the aggressive tendencies of their chief. The commission examined records from the police patrol officers' Mobile Digital Terminals (MDTs) that police use to communicate with one another. The Christopher Commission reported that its review of 182 days of MDT communications uncovered literally "hundreds of improper messages, including scores in which officers talked about beating suspects .... Officers also used the communications system to express their eagerness to be involved in shooting incidents. The transmissions also make clear that some officers enjoy the excitement of a pursuit and view it 'as an opportunity for violence against a fleeing suspect.'" Consider just a few of the comments made by LAPD officers concerning their orientation toward the use of violence. The comments demonstrate the existence of a violent subculture and the acceptance of violence by many within the department.
• "I would love to drive down Slauson with a flame thrower . . . we would have a barbecue."
• "A fem named [C] . . . I will be careful . . . we are out to get 211 susp that have been hitting almost twice a night. 2 m/blks . . . are you busy. . . .
• "I was for awhile. But now I am going to slooow it down. If you encounter these negroes shoot first and ask questions later."
• "Just clear its buxsy [busy] out hear this hole is picking up, I almost got me a Mexican last nite but he dropped the dam gun to quick, lots of wit"

Racism was also expressed openly over the communications system by both line officers and supervisors alike. The Commission's review of MDT transmissions found:

. . . an appreciable number of disturbing and recurrent racial remarks.

Some of the remarks describe minorities through animal analogies .... Often made in the context of discussing pursuits or beating suspects. The offensive remarks cover the spectrum of racial and ethnic minorities in the City .... The officers typing the MDT messages apparently had little concern that they would be disciplined for making such remarks. Consider a few of the comments made by LAPD officers about the race of citizens and appropriate police practices.

• "Well . . . I'm back over here in the projects, pissing off the natives"
• "Sounds like monkey slapping time."
• "Oh always dear . . . what's happening . . . we're huntin wabbits"    "Actually, muslim wabbits"
"Just over here on this arson/homicide . . . be careful one of those rabbits don't bite you"
"Yeah I know . . . Huntin wabbits is dangerous."
• "Wees be reedy n about 5"
• "Wees also bees hungry"
• "Hi . . . just got mexercise for the night"
• "Don't be flirting with all ur cholo girlfriends"
• "Okay people . . . pls . . . don't transfer me any Orientals . . . I had two already"
• "Lt says learn Spanish bone head . . . Sgt. [A] says tell them to go back to Mexico . . .
• "Don't cry Buckwheat. or is it Willie Lunch Meat"
• "U can c the color of the interior of the veh . . . dig." "Ya Stop cars with blk interior." "Bees they naugahyde." "Negrohide." "Self tanning no doubt."

All of the above MDT communications clearly contain insensitive and racially biased remarks. Yet, it is also important to raise the question of whether these transmissions were merely aberrations or evidence of a subculture of racism and violence that permeated the LAPD. Addressing this issue the Christopher Commission was clear when it concluded that:
The LAPD has an organizational culture that emphasizes crime control over crime prevention and that isolates the police from the communities and the people they serve. With the full support of many, the LAPD insists on aggressive detection of major crimes and a rapid, seven minute response time to calls for service. Patrol officers are evaluated by statistical measures (for example, the number of calls handled and arrests made) and are rewarded for being "hard-nosed." This style of policing produces results, but it does so at the risk of creating a siege mentality that alienates the
Witness after witness testified to unnecessarily aggressive confrontations between LAPD officers and citizens, particularly members of minority communities. From the statements of these citizens, as well as many present and former senior LAPD officers, it is apparent that too many LAPD patrol officers view citizens with resentment and hostility . . . (Christopher Commission, 1991b).

It was within this subculture of prejudice and violence that Koon, Powell, Wind and Briseno spent much of their working lives, formulated their beliefs, values and attitudes, and learned how to police the "City of Angels."

**Disturbing Beliefs, Facts and Fabrications**

There were other shocking details. The manufacturer of King's automobile was contacted concerning the ability of King's vehicle to travel at the speeds indicated in the CHP police report. Manufacturer tests of vehicles similar to that driven by Mr. King found that even a newer version of King's car could not travel at the speeds reported by the CHP. In fact, CHP's own investigation confirmed that during the car chase, King was never going more than 65 mph, not the 115 mph CHP officers reported. The Christopher Commission's investigation also questioned the veracity of the police claim that King's vehicle was traveling in excess of 100 miles per hour. Moreover, the LAPD's official report of the circumstances surrounding the arrest claimed that Mr. King was under the influence of PCP—a strong tranquilizer with hallucinogenic qualities and that he resisted arrest. These claims
were repeatedly reported in newspapers, magazines and television interviews with some of the police involved in the beating. One report even noted that the spot at which King stopped his motor car was known as a drug-dealing haven. LAPD officers were careful to characterize King's behavior in terms that invoked a drug-crazed image. Sergeant Stacey Koon characterized King as "dusted" and "oblivious to pain" (Christopher Commission). Blood tests conducted by the hospital staff where Mr. King was treated following the beating found a moderate amount of alcohol (0.075) and traces of marijuana in his system, but failed to detect any PCP or other dangerous drugs. Medical personnel at the hospital where King was treated characterized him as "quiet and cooperative," and the attending physician said that he did not feel that King was on PCP. Furthermore, police failed to recover any drugs from his vehicle or person. In short, it is likely that the police fabricated the violent, drug-crazed image of motorist Rodney King to justify their brutal actions. Finally, according to police accounts Rodney King was taken by ambulance to Pacific Hospital for treatment following the beating and was later lodged in the jail ward of the county medical center. According to nurses on duty at the time King was checked into the emergency room for treatment, officers repeatedly taunted King using "baseball" analogies and "openly joked and bragged about the number of times King had been hit". During the officers' federal trial it was learned that two of the officers lied in their log entries and that they did not take King directly to the hospital or medical holding facility. Instead, they took him to a police substation where they went
inside and told other police officers about the beating. Officer Laurence Powell subjected King to more ridicule by other police officers at the substation. According to prosecutor Steven Clymer, Officer Laurence Powell "sent police officers out to look . . . while Rodney King was in the back seat waiting for medical attention . . ."

Following the beating, this exchange was recorded on the LAPD's communication system.

"Oops, what?"
[From Powell/Wind] "I haven't beaten anyone this bad in a long time."

"Oh not again . . . why for you do that . . . I thought you agreed to chill out for a while. what did do.?"
[From Powell/Wind] "I think he was dusted . . . many broken bones later after the pursuit".

In short, the vehicle's speed of travel (and therefore the legal justification for the detention), the reported drug usage by King (and therefore a potential justification for their aggressiveness), as well as the police conduct following the brutality were at least exaggerations and probably total fabrications. What made the Rodney King incident and the subsequent investigation so shocking was not the beating inflicted (although it was severe); not the number of officers involved (even though there were many); not even the initial misrepresentation of his speed of travel (the police capacity for deception is obvious); but rather the officialized version of the incident and the calculated characterization of Mr. King to justify police aggression.

Along with the characterization of Rodney King as a criminal and drug user came the police rationalizations or "damage control efforts." The police have a hard
time fighting the war against crime; the LAPD is understaffed and out-numbered by criminals; police have to be aggressive to fight crime; and remember Mr. King was "high" and had a criminal record—all previously constructed justifications that set the stage for the King beating. One important inference to be drawn from this incident and its subsequent rationalizations is that some police officers have apparently learned that not only are they waging a dangerous war on crime which calls for aggressive measures, but that characterizing citizens as violent drug users and criminals provides some deflection and neutralization of their own violent deviance. This is particularly easy to understand given the nature of the massive public relations campaign accompanying our most recent drug war. As David Musto (1973) points out, issues of drug use and abuse have traditionally been couched in terms of a "drug fiend" mythology in the United States. The current drug war is no different, with stark and shocking images used by the government and the media to characterize the effects of drug use. The LAPD officers were careful to invoke these images and included these fabrications in their reports. Officers interviewed by television news reporters after the incident repeatedly claimed that Mr. King acted as if he were under the influence of a controlled substance—specifically naming PCP as the suspected substance. To characterize Mr. King as a PCP user might justify an aggressive police response in the public mind, since the public has come to "know" that people under the influence of drugs are dangerous, violent and the symbolic enemies of a civilized society. In a similar vein, such a characterization
served to neutralize the police self-perception of deviance. If King were "high" on PCP, then not only would the public understand the need for police violence, but the officers could then justify their conduct to themselves-insulating their image as the upholders of the law rather than the lawless.

**Targeting Victims for Police Violence**

What brought motorist Rodney King to the attention of the CHP couple? The concept of signification goes far in explaining the initial contact between Rodney King and the CHP officers. Signification becomes a specialized and protected function of the modern state. The main substance of that state function is the authorized ordaining of activities and persons as deviant, thus making them suitable objects of surveillance and control." In the case of Rodney king, there had to be some form of signification that initiated police surveillance of the vehicle and later control of the occupants of the vehicle. If the vehicle was not speeding as reported by the CHP officers, what were the factors that led officers to single out Rodney King for suspicion? "The human selection of persons to be cast in one part or another is not blind, fortuitous or without purpose. " The police needed a reason to select the King vehicle for suspicion. Perhaps King was speeding and was to be issued a citation. Perhaps King was perceived as a symbolic assailant and needed to be "adjusted." We may never know the reason why the King vehicle was detected and why these officers thought intervention was necessary. What is certain, however, is that the officers perceived the King vehicle as representing a defiance
of police authority. When King passed the CHP cruiser, this act was more than likely interpreted as a blatant defiance of the police. Defiance of police authority was further compounded when King failed to stop his vehicle in a timely manner.

. . . regardless of how relatively minor the violations that lead to their flight, fleeing motorists commit a cardinal sin against the police: instead of submitting immediately, they challenge the police and attempt to escape their pursuer's authority. In doing so, in the eyes of police officers accustomed to motorists and other citizens who do not only submit immediately to police authority but even check their speedometers in the presence of police cars, fleeing motorists become prime candidates for painful lessons at the ends of police nightsticks.

The significance of King's behavior to the police is best understood by considering the interaction between state sponsored signification and police interpretation of authority. John Van Maanen (1978:229) captured the essence of this relationship in the following passage:

In a very real sense, the patrolman-to-citizen exchanges are moral contests in which the authority of the state is either confirmed, denied, or left in doubt. To the patrolman, such contests are not to be taken lightly, for the authority of the state is also his personal authority, and is, of necessity, a matter of some concern to him. To deny or raise doubt about his legitimacy is to shake the very ground upon which his self-image and corresponding views are built.

Adding to the signification of King as a deviant was the fact that the CHP couple saw three African-American youths on the interstate in the early morning
hours. This combined with the defiant passing of the police vehicle may have been sufficient to create a formal response. Accordingly, in the eyes of the police, Rodney King and his friends were motoring deviants which "is to embark on a course that justifies, invites or warrants intervention and correction". Thus, the police were able to attach all the necessary definitions of crime, criminals and potential violence to the situation in order to warrant police intervention.

The same situation, however, was probably viewed from a very different perspective from within the King vehicle. Rodney King and his friends were out joy riding "doing nothing especially wrong." Such is often the case in the deviant's conception of behavior. "Even though he views himself as one who has done nothing especially wrong, there is still the problem of whether he can be recognized as the kind of person who has done that thing." Absent a legal justification for the stop and subsequent beating, officers had to construct the facts of the encounter in such a manner that state intervention and violence would be acceptable to a larger audience. This was accomplished, after the fact, by the official characterization of King as a dangerous deviant.

**Constructing Reality**

As the King case demonstrates, the police as public officials are free to inject speculation if not actual misrepresentation into official accountings of police-citizen encounters. These constructions later become part of the official record that a jury or other fact finder uses to determine whether an officer's actions in a particular situation amounted to misconduct, a civil rights violation or criminal
behavior. Social definitions and constructed facts also play a major role in the public perception of police and citizen interactions. Police officers are in unique positions, as compared to victims, to characterize situations, events and behaviors in such a fashion as to lend "official" credibility to their inferences, speculations or even fabrications. In the conversion from observation or fabrication to official reporting, information takes on a new and more authoritative meaning. This characterization then retroactively matches society's signification of deviance regardless of the actual initial behavior of the citizens during the police encounter.

There were several police reasons for the social construction of the King beating. First, police wanted to insulate themselves from detection and to ensure public support for their actions by characterizing King as the type of person who could be viewed as engaging in the deviance they fabricated. Second, they wanted to be able to secure a bargaining position if the charges against King were to come to court. Initially, the officers involved in the beating never conceived that they would stand trial for their abuse. In fact, most of the officers demonstrated astonishment and outright indignation at the prospect of being criminally tried. Officer Powell remarked following his Federal indictment that, "I didn't do anything wrong, so I can't believe that they're doing this again to me". When Sergeant Koon was questioned about the federal trial he remarked, "Piece of cake .... It's just a matter of educating the jury". Koon even showed up at federal court during his second trial wearing a Groucho Marx nose and glasses. Finally, the beating had to be socially situated so that it could be accepted by
peers, the department and the public. Brutality victims, on the other hand, have no such "officializing" process. Victims of police brutality, even when litigating a civil rights claim against the police, are seldom allowed to characterize police departments as dangerous, violent or even criminal. It is a near certainty that the King juries did not hear of the alleged "death squad" operating within the LAPD. Even in the rare cases where assertions of this nature can be made, victims lack access to a source of authority that can transform assertions into official accounts. Even the government's Christopher Commission could not access the personnel files of the officers involved in the beating because of a court order which prohibited their examination. Victims' characterizations, therefore, do not carry the force of an "official authoritative" accounting of events or behaviors. Where the police are allowed to present facts through their observations and officialized version of the encounter, victims are invited to present evidence of their claims. Victim's characterizations must be developed based upon documented evidence which is more often than not under the control of police departments, collected for police use, and sanitized for police purposes. It is important to remember that the Christopher Commission found that the personnel records of the most violent LAPD officers were full of outstanding evaluations, commendations, and compliments by supervisors.

Even where police departments document incidents of brutality, complaints that are not sustained by police investigators or that are not markedly similar to the incident under review cannot be
used to characterize a police agency as having a propensity toward violence. While police departments are allowed to fight the introduction of any such characterization vigorously, via official documents, there is very little to prevent the introduction of the official police characterization of the victim as a dangerous person, drug user and criminal-labels that carry with them many previously constructed images.

While it is desirable to place police use of force within the context in which it was used, courts are less willing to admit into evidence the previous misconduct of a police officer that does not directly and significantly impact the officer's decision to use force in a given situation. In fact, most courts will limit the evidence a plaintiff can use to the circumstance that immediately surrounded the officer's use of force and exclude any police wrongdoing that occurs before or after the incident under review. But did this practice affect the case of Rodney King? In August of 1993, following the federal court's sentencing of Koon and Powell, journalists uncovered a confidential internal affairs report that indicated the two officers had been involved in a previous beating. According to the report Officer Powell had used excessive force in the arrest of Danny Ramos in October of 1990. The document indicated that Powell repeatedly struck the handcuffed suspect with a flashlight and that the use of force constituted "serious misconduct." Ironically, Sergeant Koon was also criticized in the document for failing to question Powell's use of force. During the incident, Koon was said to have used profanity and to have destroyed a piece of paper used by witnesses to record the officers' names (Associated
Press, 1993). Unfortunately, the LAPD refrained from formally disciplining the officers until after the first trial concluded, and federal judge John G. Davies refused to allow the evidence to be admitted during the trial and characterized it as irrelevant to his sentencing decision. Officer speculation regarding a suspect's clarity of mind and inferences as to their alcohol and drug use or previous criminal behavior is often seen as directly relevant to an understanding of the context in which an officer used force—even if the officer had no knowledge of it at the time of the incident. With such a situation, police officers can characterize the victims of police violence in terms that neutralize claims of police deviance or criminality. The construction of the reality of a police-citizen encounter is decidedly skewed in favor of the "officialized" police version of the incident. Police departments are not required to undergo the same legal hurdles to produce a criminal history of a brutality victim and are free to inject this bias into the officially constructed proofs of the incident through their investigation of the case. Similarly, when police officers characterize brutality victims as drug users they are not required to advise citizens that they are free to have independent laboratory analysis conducted to refute any such characterization. Citizens may hear of the constructed proofs of their officialized deviance only after it is impossible to refute the assertion and a stigma has already been associated with the characterization. Unfortunately, a citizen must be injured to the extent that they require critical medical attention before they would have tangible evidence to counter any such police characterization. This was the case
in the "King beating." Had Rodney King not suffered serious physical injuries that called for immediate medical attention and had the beating not been captured on video, the violent drug-user characterization would have been left unchallenged and King would have remained just another inner-city, drug-crazed young man who attacked the police. 

There are other indirect, constructed proofs of a police brutality victim's criminality and drug use. What clear-minded citizen would run from the police? Aside from the legally irrelevant facts that a suspect may have been beaten by the police on a previous occasion or that certain segments of the population have learned by experience that police-citizen encounters sometimes result in violence, the ready conclusion is that anyone who runs from the police must have something to hide. Resembling a criminal is a dangerous proposition in America. Drug users are violent, and criminals are the dangerous enemy in the war on crime. Thus, police use of force has become an accepted justification if it keeps the streets safe for law-abiding citizens.

**Summary**

Some police officers have learned that the characterization of citizens as drug abusers and criminals carries with it certain advantages in terms of justifying the use of force. Justification of the use of force in the drug war extends to use of force in other criminal matters, if the citizen is characterized as a drug offender. Such characterizations serve some very pragmatic police purposes. When citizens are characterized as drug users, it tends to support the inference that force was necessary in order to subdue the citizen,
since the constructed reality of drug use instructs that users are dangerous people with a propensity for violence. Characterization of citizens as drug users also tends to discredit the victim's accounting of the alleged police brutality, since drug use clouds judgment and perception. Social definitions inform us that anyone who would use drugs would also be capable of deceit. Characterizing police brutality victims as drug users inhibits the ability of "ordinary" citizens to identify with the victim—thus making it less likely that a jury reviewing the incident can mentally put themselves in the place of the brutality victim. Therefore, characterizations inhibit the normal identification process required for establishing credibility with a white, middle-class, fact finder. The assigned new identity controls and overrides any other perception a jury or other fact finder could have of the victim. In short, through official characterization, King became America's, symbol of violence. Drug and crime characterizations shift the perception of who was in control of the incident from the police to the victim. Therefore, public attention is shifted from what the police did to what the citizen failed to do. In effect, attention is deflected from police criminality to the victim's state-sponsored characterization. In doing so, attention is deflected from police deviance to questions of the victim's deviance.