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Police violence

# Rubber Bullets Are Anything but "Nonlethal." They Should Be Banned.

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**US police have used rubber bullets against civilian protesters on a massive scale. These projectiles actually originated in Northern Ireland and their history is anything but "nonlethal." There can be no justification for police use of rubber bullets.**

As part of their violent clampdown on protests against racism and police brutality, US police forces have been routinely firing rubber bullets at unarmed demonstrators, from Minneapolis to Los Angeles, Phoenix to Nashville. These so-called nonlethal or less lethal weapons have become a standard tool of US policing, along with tear gas and pepper spray, used freely against protesters and journalists alike.

It's not just the United States, either. French riot police used the projectiles on a huge scale in their response to the "yellow vests" protest movement. By May 2019, police violence had blinded twenty-four people and left 283 more with head injuries, most of which were caused by rubber bullets.

This will come as no surprise to people in Northern Ireland, the world's first laboratory for the use of rubber and plastic bullets. During the Troubles, these supposedly "nonlethal" weapons killed seventeen people, including eight children between the ages of ten and fifteen.

From Derry to Detroit, police forces have repeatedly used rubber bullets to inflict death or serious injury on defenseless civilians. They've always been a different form of lethal violence, not an alternative to it, and their deployment against protesters should be as unacceptable as the use of live ammunition.

## Britain's Laboratory

The British Army and the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) started using rubber bullets on the streets of Northern Ireland in 1970. Later that decade, the state security forces replaced the projectiles with plastic bullets. By the late 1990s, soldiers and police officers had fired over 120,000 rubber and plastic bullets in total.

The context in which the security forces started using these weapons is revealing. Until the spring of 1972, the British government was determined to prop up the Unionist administration in the region, in the face of strong opposition from the nationalist minority. Catholic civil rights demonstrators drew inspiration from the African-American freedom movement in the United States. When the state responded to their protests with violence, some Catholics became disillusioned with the civil rights strategy and turned to the Irish Republican Army (IRA) instead.

In the early '70s, the British government deployed its soldiers against both IRA guerrillas and civilian protesters. But there was a limit to how much force they could use against the nationalist population. Northern Ireland was part of the UK, and journalists could travel there quite easily. The victims of state violence were white, English-speaking Westerners with a network of sympathizers in the United States. Crude repression wasn't a viable strategy in the long run.

The Bloody Sunday massacre in January 1972, when British troops gunned down fourteen civilians on a civil rights march in Derry, was a propaganda disaster for the British authorities. In the wake of the massacre, they shut down the regional government and came up with a reform package in the hope of winning over a section of the nationalist

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community. They also recalibrated the use of violence by the security forces to ensure there would be no more Bloody Sundays to attract the attention of the world's media.

This is where rubber bullets came in. It wasn't a matter of compassion so much as plausible deniability. When soldiers fire live ammunition into a crowd of people, they know perfectly well what the results will be, and so does everyone else. If they use rubber or plastic bullets, their political bosses can present it to the media as a more humane approach to crowd control.

In fact, the British authorities understood from the start that these projectiles were far more dangerous than they let on. The first person killed by a rubber bullet in Northern Ireland was an eleven-year-old boy, Francis Rowntree, in April 1972. In 2017, an official inquest found that Rowntree had died after being shot in the head by a soldier who "fired without warning into the crowd." The coroner also established that Rowntree had not been taking part in rioting when the soldier opened fire.

The same year, another child, Richard Moore, lost his sight after a soldier fired a rubber bullet into his face in Derry. Moore's family brought a civil action against the British government for his injury. State papers released in 2013 showed that the government's advisers had urged it to settle the action out of court, because legal proceedings would expose the damning truth about rubber bullets, which "could be lethal" and "could and did cause serious injuries."

## "Wrong and Unjustifiable"

The new plastic bullets used by the British Army and the RUC from the mid-1970s were supposed to be less harmful than rubber bullets. Yet ten of the seventeen people killed by the projectiles during the Troubles lost their lives between 1980 and 1984, with six deaths in 1981 alone.

A British neurosurgeon who had visited Belfast's Royal Victoria Hospital wrote to Margaret Thatcher to inform her about the impact of plastic bullets on children:

The skull of a child is easily shattered and penetrated by a hard object travelling at speed. A plastic bullet striking the head of the child not only penetrates the skull, driving small fragments of bone into the brain, but it also causes considerable local tissue deformation . . . survivors have a high probability of being paralysed down one side of the body as well as intellectual and personality changes. Some will probably be so disabled that it would be better if they had not survived at all.

In her reply, the British prime minister made no attempt to challenge these medical findings, but claimed that the use of plastic bullets was "strictly controlled by police and army regulations" and offered "the most effective means of controlling the recent severe rioting that is consistent with the principle of using a minimum of force."

Three of the people killed by the security forces in the early 1980s were children. They included Paul Whitters, a fifteen-year-old boy from Derry. In 2007, Northern Ireland's Police Ombudsman found that the killing of Whitters by the RUC was "wrong and unjustifiable," and bluntly refuted Margaret Thatcher's claim about the responsible use of plastic bullets:

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No warning was given by loud-hailer, and [the gun] was fired at less than the permissible range of twenty metres. The police justification for the shooting was that the baton gun was used to prevent a lorry being hijacked, and they said that the rules permitted this. We have found no evidence that Paul intended to hijack the lorry, or that the safety of officers was at risk. Police officers did not say that the gun was fired because there was a serious risk of injury to anyone.

In 2019, Paul's mother Helen Whitters discovered that there was a file on his killing in the UK National Archives. The British authorities had decided to keep the record under lock and key until 2059 (normally files are released to the public after thirty years). Whitters appealed to the Northern Ireland secretary, Karen Bradley, urging her to release the file. Bradley rejected her plea.

## "Inherent Inaccuracy"

The British security forces continued using plastic bullets into the 1990s and beyond. In 2003, a report for the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission warned that the latest baton round, introduced two years earlier, was "neither an accurate nor a safe weapon."

In 2017, a study for the *British Medical Journal* looked at the impact of "kinetic impact projectiles" (KIPs, another term for rubber bullets). The study put together evidence from Northern Ireland, Turkey, India, the United States, and other countries between 1990 and 2017. It found that 3 percent of those injured by rubber bullets died as a result of their injuries, while 15.5 percent suffered permanent disabilities. Nearly half of those who had been struck on the head or neck were killed:

Given their inherent inaccuracy, potential for misuse, and associated health consequences of severe injury, disability, and death, KIPs do not appear to be appropriate weapons for use in crowd-control settings. There is an urgent need to establish international guidelines on the use of crowd-control weapons to prevent unnecessary injuries and deaths.

Richard Moore, who was blinded by a rubber bullet in 1972, urged people to learn from the weapon's grim history in Northern Ireland: "They shouldn't have brought them onto the streets. I'm alive to talk about it. There are children who are not alive to talk about it."

The "potential for abuse" identified by the *British Medical Journal* is an inherent feature of rubber bullets. We've already seen many reports of American police officers firing their baton guns directly at protesters and journalists, instead of aiming them at the ground in line with protocol. There's only one way to eliminate the danger posed by these weapons: to scrap them altogether.

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Source [Jacobin](#).

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