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What's happening out of camera range?

By now, millions of TV viewers have seen the video numerous times on television: Two police officers are beating a man on the pavement. It's big news -- because a camera was there.

Robert Davis, a 64-year-old retired teacher, suffered injuries during the incident on the night of Oct. 8 in New Orleans. He's scheduled to go on trial with charges that include resisting arrest and battery on one of the police officers who beat him. But under the circumstances, the man on the receiving end of the violence got lucky.

Ordinarily, there's no evidence to dispute the accounts provided by police officers after such violence occurs. The news media and the legal system are oriented to accept the word of uniformed authorities and discount the claims of defendants. For journalists and judges, the official story becomes The Story.

Davis' ordeal was unusual, and caused a national uproar, because an Associated Press Television News crew happened to be near. But for every exceptional incident that exposes official misconduct to national view, there are countless deplorable events that never see the light of media day.

Naturally, people are on their best behavior when they know they're being watched -- especially through a camera lens. And the worst behavior comes when people assume that they aren't being watched.

For journalists, the usual assumption is that there's nothing to report if nothing unusual takes place. Without video, there's no story when a bloodied suspect is taken into custody.

But people who've been incarcerated are apt to know something that American media outlets rarely acknowledge: Beyond the glare of publicity and outside of camera range, people in police custody and behind bars are vulnerable to capricious and dangerous acts of violence by tax-funded employees.

Overall, it's a safe bet that news media would do a better job of scrutinizing such institutionalized violence if the victims included substantial numbers of affluent people. But it's a truism that few well-to-do people can be found in prison. A white-collar

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executive who cuts legal corners is very unlikely to go to the slammer, even though a wide range of corporate swindles are harmful to the well-being of the public.

"We have a system shaped by economic bias from the start," criminal justice analyst Jeffrey H. Reiman wrote more than two decades ago. His words still ring true. "The dangerous acts and crimes unique to the wealthy are either ignored or treated lightly, while for the so-called common crimes, the poor are far more likely than the well-off to be arrested, if arrested charged, if charged convicted, and if convicted sentenced to prison."

Being poor is a big hazard when it comes to mistreatment by police officers and the legal system. So is being a person of color. Robert Davis is black. And while we might say that what happened to him could have happened to anyone, his race was a very significant risk factor.

The outcry over the video of police officers beating Davis may seem to offer reassurance that the news media are concerned about fair play and social justice. But journalism should involve much more than showing footage that materializes by happenstance.

An underlying assumption, usually prevailing in newsrooms, is that police officers and legal authorities are truthful but suspects and prisoners are not. This assumption routinely prevents media outlets from digging below the surface of stories.

Troubling questions remain. Such as: What are police officers doing with suspects when no cameras are around? What's going on behind bars? And how can we hold police officers and prison guards accountable if we don't really know what they're doing?

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