

The videotape shows an Inglewood, California Police Officer Jeremy Morse hitting a handcuffed teenager named Donovan Jackson. Only those present, and perhaps not even they, know exactly what happened. Nor could a jury decide the matter; Morse's trial on assault charges ended in a mistrial last week when jurors could not reach a verdict. (Prosecutors say they'll try the case again.)

Without doubt a white officer was bleeding and angry, and a handcuffed black 16-year-old got sucker-punched. But this is not about white and black. It's about "new-school" policing and "old-school" police. Let us assume, as claimed by Morse's lawyer, that Jackson grabbed and squeezed Morse's testicles. If that happened to you, what would you do?

One school of thought — call it old school — believes in the moral righteousness of hitting back. Phrases like "he got what he deserved" and "you reap what you sow" come to mind. If someone disrespects you and grabs your private parts? The old school says legal niceties be damned!

But the law is new school. The new school doesn't believe in hitting someone back. New-school police believe in cuffing criminals and writing solid reports. The new school says two wrongs don't make a right. If you find the whole concept of "disrespect" a bit bizarre, you're new school.

Though we demand new-school behavior from our police, most police officers are firmly old school. In my police academy class, more than 70 percent of the recruits admitted, most often proudly, that as children they were physically disciplined with more than spanking. The new school calls this child abuse. Old school says it's parenting. Old-school police believe that the disrespectful deserve a "good thumping." After an aside about not being "politically correct," police will tell you of all kinds of people they would like to beat: a suspect who runs, a son who curses his mother, a man who rapes a woman, anyone who hurts a child. It's not about race. It's about respect.

Ironically, in the world of policing, most citizens encountered by police share old-school values. I heard stories about the old days, not very long ago, when minor offenders were given a choice between going to jail and taking a hit or two. Most offenders happily chose an honorable "beat and release" over the indignity of a night in the city slammer.

But society, or at least influential parts of it, decided that police violence must stop. "It's strange," an officer assigned to desk duty told me. "When I started this job, everybody told me I was too nice. Now they say I'm too violent. But I haven't changed. That's how much this department has changed." Given difficult and often dangerous working conditions, the overwhelming restraint exercised by police should be far more recognized and appreciated. The real surprise about police violence is just how rarely it happens.

Police departments evolved. "Street justice" is no longer administered as standard procedure. Police officers are fired for unnecessary force. Unfounded accusations destroy careers. And no officer wants to be on trial. Whether grudgingly or with relief, police officers understand that new-school rules are in effect. But effective new-school policing requires new-school police. Recruiting such police could take money. Lots of it. Far more than cities have or taxpayers are willing to pay.

Fortunately, there's a better way. Many people are willing to work tough jobs for too little pay. Like teaching, policing has intrinsic value and provides the means to do good. But too many potentially good police — precisely the new-school types less inclined to hit a handcuffed suspect — won't join an organization filled with Marine haircuts, snappy salutes and a six-month boot camp. What other civilian profession hides behind a conservative faux-military facade? What other occupation demands that you stand at attention every time a boss enters the room? Too few people with 4-year college degrees and liberal upbringings want a job in a conservative organization with archaic grooming codes and bad hours. While the hours won't change, the police organization can.

If police departments treated their employees more like professionals, more professionals with new-school attitudes would join the police. Ideological diversity would change police culture from within. In the meantime, it does little good to be surprised, even shocked, when police smack somebody with a bad attitude. Donovan Jackson will not be the last person hit by police. Not as long as we demand new-school policing from old-school police.