
Introduction: “No Justice, No Peace”: Social Unrest in Ferguson

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Ferguson, a city in St. Louis County Missouri, was incorporated in 1894. Its nickname is “Community of Choice” and its motto is “Proud Past. Promising Future!” Sadly, the tragic death of an unarmed Black man and the national attention given to this death has resulted in the word Ferguson being synonymous with police misconduct, violence, and social unrest.

On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, an 18-year old Black man, was fatally shot by Darren Wilson, a white policeman with the Ferguson Police Department. The incident sparked protests and acts of vandalism in Ferguson, as well as widespread calls for an investigation into the incident. After a day of vigils, the looting of businesses, vandalizing of vehicles, as well as protestors’ violent clash with policemen occurred. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (F.B.I.) opened a civil rights inquiry into the shooting of Mr. Brown on August 11th. Soldiers from the Missouri National Guard arrived August 18th in Ferguson at the request of the Governor of Missouri Jay Nixon, who ended midnight to 5:00 a.m. curfews that had been imposed. Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. arrived in Ferguson, promising a full inquiry into the death of Michael Brown 2 days later. The Justice Department announced that it would open a broad civil rights investigation that would examine whether the Ferguson police had a history of discrimination or misuse of force beyond the Michael Brown case September 3rd. The inquiry accompanied the F.B.I. civil rights investigation (opened on August 11) that specifically looked into the shooting of Mr. Brown. November 24 of 2014, a grand jury decided it would not indict Wilson in the shooting death of Brown. Following the announcement of the grand jury’s decision, there were peaceful protests as well as rioting (New York Times, November 24, 2014).

March 4 of 2015, the Ferguson Police Department was criticized by the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) for “routinely violating the constitutional rights of its black residents.” During a press conference, Attorney General Eric H. Holder, Jr. revealed disturbing findings from the DOJ’s extensive, 87-page report. In that report, Holder revealed: A disproportionate amount of African-Americans were targeted for traffic stops and other low-level violations; the police relied too heavily on the use of force (almost 90 percent of “unnecessary force” incidents were against African-Americans); and “frequently escalate(d) rather than diffuse(d) tensions with the residents they encounter(ed).” Furthermore,

individuals were often denied their due-process rights in the local jail system. In essence, the city’s dependence on fines for minor offenses was merely done to fill municipal coffers (The United States Department of Justice, 2015). In order “to rebuild trust and foster mutual understanding in Ferguson and in all communities where suspicion has been allowed to fester,” the United States Department of Justice reserved “all its rights and abilities to force compliance and implement basic change” within the Ferguson Police Department and the Ferguson Municipal Court (2015). Essentially, the DOJ report revealed police brutality and mistreatment to be the routine reality for Black residents in Ferguson and that immediate government action was needed to rebuild community trust that had been so badly eroded.

Police brutality is not a new phenomenon. Over four decades ago, Albert J. Reiss (1968) revealed police brutality to be “far from rare.” Furthermore, a study in three large cities found the most likely victim to be a lower-class man of either race. However, subsequent studies found Black men to be substantially more likely than White men to be victims of police violence and homicide (Baldassare, 1994; Beer, 2015; Cha-Jua, 2014; Chaney & Robertson, 2015; Cush, 2013; Duru, 2004; Geller, 1982; Goldkamp, 1986; Milton, Halleck, Lardner, & Abrecht, 1977; Sheppard, 2015; Sherman & Langworthy, 1979).

The death of Michael Brown, the ensuing protests and riots, and subsequent military involvement mirrors to a national tragedy that occurred 23 years ago. On March 3 of 1991, Los Angeles motorist Rodney King (1965-2012) was surrounded by four white police officers, several of them striking him repeatedly, while other officers stood by. The videotaped beating of Rodney King provided documented proof of the animus many officers of law enforcement held for African-Americans (Chaney & Robertson, 2014), inflamed racial relations, and raised public concern about police treatment of minorities. Four officers were charged with assault with a deadly weapon and use of excessive force. Three were acquitted of all charges. The jury acquitted the fourth of assault with a deadly weapon, but failed to reach a verdict on the use of excessive force. The jury deadlocked at 8–4 in favor of acquittal at the state level. The acquittals are generally considered to have triggered the 1992 Los Angeles riots, where 53 people were killed, over 2,000 were injured, and riots that resulted in the cumulative loss of at least \$3.8 billion

in taxable sales and over \$125 million in direct sales tax revenue losses (Matheson & Baade, 2004). As was the reality in Ferguson, the riots ended only when the military was called and intervened.

Police hold a history of killing unarmed citizens and members of the group possess certain attitudes that increase the likelihood these incidents occur, thereby placing the public at risk (Roberg, Crank, & Kuykendall, 2000). Although several theories have been offered to explain why police use excessive force (Carson, 2015; Jacobs, 1998; Worden, 1996), police generally perceive themselves as soldiers in the war on drugs. Furthermore, the insularity and authoritarianism of some administrations has led many officers to feel their actions are beyond accountability (Bayley & Bittner, 1984; Scharf & Binder, 1983; Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993). In addition, even when there is little evidence that departmental rules have been enforced, prosecutors rarely indict police who have killed citizens (Fyfe, 1988; Kobler, 1975). As a result, the police become stable members of a law enforcement system that perpetuates and protects institutional racism (Souhami, 2014).

Statistics from the National Police Misconduct Statistics and Reporting Project (NPMSRP) compiled between the months of April 2009 and June 2010 offer evidence of the severity of this problem. According to the NPMSRP, there were 5,986 reports of misconduct, 382 fatalities linked to misconduct, settlements and judgments that totaled \$347,455,000, 33% of misconduct cases that went through to convictions, and 64% of misconduct cases that received prison sentences. The average length of time convicted officers spent in prison was 14 months (National Police Misconduct Reporting Project, 2011). And while some respondents on the NPMSRP site had respect for members of law enforcement, the overwhelming majority of them had contempt for law enforcement, were suspicious of it, and believed law enforcement to be agents of brutality (Chaney & Robertson, 2013).

Since Black teens are 21 times more likely to be fatally shot than their White counterparts (Flatlow, 2014; Gabrielson, Grochowski, & Sagara, 2014), the fatal shooting of Michael Brown serves as a painful reminder to African-Americans and other marginalized communities of their own mortality as well as the blatant disregard that police have for Black life.

The popularity of the recent film “Straight Outta’

Compton” chronicles the long term nationwide presence of police brutality and the abuse of people of color. The idea that the rap group NWA rose to high fame suggests the negative sentiments communities of color have long held of law enforcement. The result of hostility between White police officers and minority populations can be viewed as a form of both social, and for individuals, personal trauma from which we require mass healing. This volume offers voice to those affected by or have witnessed this form of trauma and their allies.

During his famous “I Have a Dream Speech,” the late Martin Luther King (2012) said, “There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, “When will you be satisfied?” We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.” Those words were uttered on August 28, 1963. Significant increases in the number of unarmed Blacks killed by police make these words especially timely today.

This special issue highlights the broad perspectives of scholars, attorneys, community activists, and student protestors regarding the events in Ferguson. Structural reform in regards to the control deadly force by police in Ferguson and other cities in the nation necessitates that law enforcement entities establish an equitable balance of risk to protect police officers (from being hurt by armed citizens) and citizens (from being erroneously shot by police) (Scharf & Binder, 1983).

The special issue is dedicated to Michael Brown and all families in Ferguson who are unitedly, wholeheartedly, and untiringly committed to seeking justice through peace.

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