



POLITICS

The Brutality of Police Culture in Baltimore

Years of abuses are every bit as egregious as what the Department of Justice documented in Ferguson, Missouri, and as deserving of a national response.



Jose Luis Magana / Reuters

CONOR FRIEDERSDORF | APR 22, 2015

In Baltimore, where 25-year-old Freddie Gray died shortly after being taken into police custody, an

investigation may uncover homicidal misconduct by law enforcement, as happened in the North Charleston, South Carolina, killing of Walter Scott. Or the facts may confound the darkest suspicions of protestors, as when the Department of Justice released its report on the killing of Michael Brown.

What's crucial to understand, as Baltimore residents take to the streets in long-simmering frustration, is that their general grievances are valid regardless of how this case plays out. For as in Ferguson, where residents suffered through [years of misconduct](#) so egregious that most Americans could scarcely conceive of what was going on, the people of Baltimore are policed by an entity that perpetrates stunning abuses. The difference is that this time we needn't wait for a DOJ report to tell us so. Harrowing evidence has been presented. Yet America hasn't looked.

I include myself.

Despite actively reading and commenting on police misconduct for many years, I was unaware until yesterday that the *Baltimore Sun* published a searing 2014 article documenting recent abuses that are national scandals in their own rights.

A grandmother's bones were broken. A pregnant woman was violently thrown to the ground. Millions of dollars were paid out to numerous victims of police brutality.

And almost none of us noticed!

So I join all who say that protests in Baltimore should remain peaceful, and I will continue to withhold judgment about Gray's death until more facts are known.

But I also insist that Baltimore protests are appropriate regardless of what happened to Freddie Gray, as is more federal scrutiny and intervention. Although much was rightly made of Ferguson's racially unrepresentative local leadership, the presence of a black mayor and a diverse city council has not solved Baltimore's police problem, partly because the DOJ responded to revelations of epidemic brutality with less than [the full-scale civil rights probe that some residents requested](#) and because Maryland pols have [thwarted reform bills urged by city leaders](#).

There are so many good reasons for locals to be outraged.

The Baltimore Sun's [article](#) shows why in detail. And a few choice excerpts are the best beginning in this attempt to contextualize the ongoing protests within recent history.

Let's start with the money.

\$5.7 million is the amount the city paid to victims of brutality between 2011 and 2014. And as huge as that figure is, the more staggering number in the article is this one: "Over the past four years, more than 100 people have won court judgments or settlements related to allegations of brutality and civil-rights violations." What tiny percentage of the unjustly beaten win formal legal judgments?

If you're imagining that they were all men in their twenties, think again:

Victims include a 15-year-old boy riding a dirt bike, a 26-year-old pregnant accountant who had witnessed a beating, a 50-year-old woman selling church raffle tickets, a 65-year-old church deacon rolling a cigarette and an 87-year-old grandmother aiding her wounded grandson. Those

cases detail a frightful human toll. Officers have battered dozens of residents who suffered broken bones — jaws, noses, arms, legs, ankles — head trauma, organ failure, and even death, coming during questionable arrests. Some residents were beaten while handcuffed; others were thrown to the pavement.

The 87-year-old grandmother was named Venus Green. A former teacher with two college degrees, she spent her retirement years as a foster parent for needy children. She was on her porch one day when her grandson ran up crying for an ambulance.

He'd been shot.

The article goes on to tell her story from a legal document in her successful lawsuit:

Paramedics and police responded to the emergency call, but the white officer became hostile.

“What happened? Who shot you?” Green recalled the officer saying to her grandson, according to an 11-page letter in which she detailed the incident for her lawyer. Excerpts from the letter were included in her lawsuit. “You’re lying. You know you were shot inside that house. We ain’t going to help you because you are lying.”

“Mister, he isn’t lying,” replied Green, who had no criminal record. “He came from down that way running, calling me to call the ambulance.”

The officer, who is not identified in the lawsuit, wanted to go into the basement, but Green demanded a warrant. Her grandson kept two dogs downstairs and she feared they would attack. The officer unhooked the lock, but Green latched it. He shoved Green against the wall.

She hit the wooden floor. “Bitch, you ain’t no better than any of the other old black bitches I have locked up,” Green recalled the officer saying as he stood over her. “He pulled me up, pushed me in the dining room over the couch, put his knees in my back, twisted my arms and wrist and put handcuffs on my hands and threw me face down on the couch.”

After pulling Green to her feet, the officer told her she was under arrest. Green complained of pain. “My neck and shoulder are hurting,” Green told him. “Please take these handcuffs off.” An African-American officer then walked in the house, saw her sobbing and asked that the handcuffs be removed since Green wasn’t violent. The cuffs came off, and Green didn’t face any charges. But a broken shoulder tormented her for months.

When pondering the fact that Baltimore paid out \$5.7 million in brutality settlements over four years, consider that the payout in this case was just \$95,000. (For the story of the pregnant woman and many others, the full article is [here](#).)

Lest anyone imagine that this investigation was the only tipoff of egregious misconduct among Baltimore police, more context is useful. The period covered in the brutality investigation came immediately after the FBI [caught 51 Baltimore police officers](#) in a scheme that resulted in at least 12 extortion convictions.

Shortly after the investigation was published this happened on a Baltimore street:

This year a detective who retired from the police force last year [demonstrated a violent streak](#)—he allegedly

took part in a motorcycle-club brawl that left a man hospitalized. [Also in 2014](#), "a city police officer was charged with felony assault after he stormed into a home in full uniform Monday and threatened to kill his wife with his service weapon." And Baltimore police [tased a hospitalized meningitis patient](#) 5 times in the course of ten minutes. He died soon after. Prosecutors did not file charges.

Another cop was [charged with an assault on a 14-year-old boy](#).

Even animals couldn't escape the brutality of the Baltimore police last year. In July, "Officer Thomas Schmidt, a 24-year veteran assigned to the Emergency Services unit, was placed on paid administrative leave after police say he held down a Shar-Pei while a fellow officer, Jeffrey Bolger, slit the dog's throat." A month later, a Baltimore police officer plead guilty "to a felony animal cruelty charge after he fatally beat and choked his girlfriend's Jack Russell terrier," an August 5 article [noted](#). The very same year, even one of Baltimore's good cops [couldn't escape the horror show of dead animals](#): "Four investigators from agencies outside Baltimore are working to determine [who left a dead rat](#) on the car windshield of an officer who was cooperating with prosecutors on a police brutality case."

What about the prior year?

There was a murder-suicide, with a policeman [killing](#) a firefighter, his girlfriend, and himself. There was a different officer who [killed himself in jail](#) after being charged with killing his fiancée. In yet another case, "Abdul Salaam, 36, says he was beaten in July 2013 after a traffic stop by officers Nicholas Chapman and Jorge Bernardez-Ruiz and that he never got a response to his complaint filed with internal affairs," *The Sun* [reported](#). "Those officers would be implicated less than three weeks later in the death of 44-year-old Tyrone West while he was in police custody." Also in 2013, a jury acquitted an off-duty police officer on

manslaughter charges after he chased down and killed a 17-year-old boy who may or may not have thrown a [rock that thumped harmlessly into his front door](#). And that's not even getting into [serious corruption that wasn't brutality](#).

I could go on, but I've long since started to skim past stories like "[Baltimore police officer pimps out his own wife](#)" and thinking, meh, I've seen worse from cops there. The cop who [shot himself and lied about it](#) to get worker's comp benefits? Meh, at least he didn't shoot someone else and then lie about what happened. There is just a staggering level of dysfunction in the department, and residents of Baltimore, a city that could use a professional crime-fighting force if ever there was one, have suffered under it year after year after year. Pick one. (Take 2008! A Baltimore cop shot a man twice in the back. [He was acquitted, too.](#))

There is so much I haven't included ([example](#)), and I've just trawled through the archives of *The Baltimore Sun* for a two-year period. They cover most police-involved deaths, but no newspaper covers more than a minuscule subset of use-of-force incidents.



So no wonder protestors are out in Baltimore after this latest death.

No wonder that a meeting on police brutality this week [had to be moved to a bigger venue](#) because so many Baltimore residents are concerned enough to come out in person. "Dozens of residents—most of them black—inundated federal officials with their assertions that city police have been brutalizing residents with impunity," a just-published *Baltimore Sun* [article](#) reports. It includes a quote from a 35-year-old who asked the feds, "When are you all going to help us?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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