



LAW ENFORCEMENT TODAY



EDITORIAL



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(SHAWN SIPES)

Baltimore Crime and American Policing

Background

USA Today offered an analysis addressing why Baltimore has become America's deadliest city. Their article examined police "disengagement" as an explanation for the profound rise of violence in Baltimore. By disengagement, they mean a lack of proactive, self-initiated policing.

There are additional reports responding to the USA Today article harshly critical of cops.

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The story isn't solely about Baltimore, its symbolic of what's happening in many American cities.

Self-Disclosure

I was the Director of Public Information for the Maryland Department of Public Safety (a law enforcement and correctional entity) during the start of aggressive policing in Baltimore. I was a front-row witness to what happened and why, while interacting daily with Baltimore police, state officials, and the media.

Introduction

I wrote "Did Baltimore Kill American Policing," in August of 2016 (edited):

"The multitude of police shootings echoed throughout the country and both police officers and the American public wrestled with the aftermath. For many, it began with Ferguson but for others, the real impact on American policing started with the indictment of six police officers in Baltimore.

While much of the attention went to police use of deadly force, in Baltimore, the thoughts of many American police officers focused on the indictments and their belief that the six officers were arrested for something that cops do every day.

There is endless pressure in every community in America to get people like Freddie Gray out of neighborhoods, off the corner. He had an illegal knife. He was well known to law enforcement. He ran at the approach of police officers. The arrest was made and he was transported; Freddie Gray died after the transport.

Regardless of your view of the facts of the case, it wasn't a cop pulling a trigger under questionable circumstances. It wasn't officers beating the suspect before throwing him into a police van. The arrest mimicked the actions of cops throughout the country.

Allegations as to giving a defendant a "rough ride" were never proven in court (or the court of public opinion) and there were a series of mistrials or not guilty verdicts before the State's Attorney's Office dropped all charges. The State's Attorney was sued by the officers for illegal arrest and prosecution; a university professor offered charges for disbarment.

With the indictment of the six police officers in Baltimore and the seriousness of the charges, there wasn't a cop in the country that was unaffected. All police officers internalized the indictments. All understood that the arrest and transportation of Freddie Gray was something they do every day.

"If cops in Baltimore could be arrested for homicide for what they did, then I could be indicted for the same thing," they reasoned.

The view of cops in America, "If you are going to arrest me for doing something that I do daily, then I need to disengage," [Crime in America](#).

Baltimore, like so many cities, was engaging in aggressive, self-initiated, proactive policing.

Everyone Demanded Proactive Policing

In Baltimore, everyone knew what the city police was doing regarding mass arrests, why they were doing it, and the results, which begs the question, "If so awful, why wasn't it stopped?" After all, we are talking about a story unfolding over decades.

No one disputes the scathing nature of the Department of Justice's report on the Baltimore City Police after the death of Freddie Gray and the resulting riots. But who is to blame, the officers of the Baltimore City Police, the community leaders demanding action or the policies implemented by the city of Baltimore and state of Maryland?

When you read reports in the media and resulting public comments, you get the idea that the collective body of cops in Baltimore were uncaring, brutal, thugs who threw out the US Constitution while ruining the lives of individual citizens through mass arrest.

But is this a fair perception of Baltimore cops, or the individuals making policy?

In Baltimore, everyone knew what the city police was doing, and why they were doing it, including journalists. We allowed reporters into the city jail where they witnessed massive overcrowding. The graphics were overwhelming.

Is it fair to ask about the role of the media? I guarantee that new reporters for the Baltimore Sun, the Washington Post, and others asked their predecessors, “If so bad, why didn’t we stop it?”

The New York City Miracle

Crime and disorder in New York City was legendary and every student of criminology studied the broken windows theory of proactive policing whereby taking care of the little stuff, the big stuff would take care of itself.

Signs of disorder (i.e., loitering, littering, public intoxication or drug use/sales, jaywalking, graffiti) were to be immediately addressed and in the process, individuals were to be searched for major drugs and weapons.

The issues most citizens were concerned about (crime, grime, and disorder) were confronted as long as police had the legal right to search the person. Minor infractions were given a summons and those toting guns and major drugs were arrested.

Crime was driven down dramatically and citizens were happy with the results. According to many, mass arrests stabilized the city and allowed for rapid economic and population growth along with reduced crime that lasts to this day. The New York City miracle was enthusiastically embraced by other cities, including Baltimore, [Crime in America](#).

USA Today Article

From “The Crime Report”: “Just before a wave of violence turned Baltimore into the nation’s deadliest big city, its officers seemed to stop noticing crime, [USA Today reports](#). Police officers reported seeing fewer drug dealers on the streets, and they encountered fewer people who had open arrest warrants. Police questioned fewer people. In spring 2015, as Baltimore faced rioting after Freddie Gray died from injuries in the back of a police van, officers appeared to turn a blind eye to everyday violations. The number of potential violations they reported seeing dropped by nearly half. It has largely stayed that way ever since. “What officers are doing is they’re just driving looking forward. They’ve got horse blinders on,” says Kevin Forrester, a retired Baltimore detective.

In the surge of shootings and killings, the murder rate reached an all-time high last year; 342 people were

killed. Shootings in some neighborhoods have more than tripled. Baltimore offers a view of the possible costs of a national reckoning over how police officers have treated minorities. Starting in 2014, racially charged encounters cast an unflattering spotlight on aggressive police tactics toward blacks. Cities have been under pressure to crack down on abuses by law enforcement. In Baltimore, from 2014 to 2017, the number of suspected narcotics offenses police reported dropped 30 percent; the number of times police approach someone for questioning fell 70 percent. Policing in the city has changed “very dramatically,” says Prof. Donald Norris of the University of Maryland Baltimore County. “The outcome ... has been a lot more crime in Baltimore, especially murders, and people are getting away with those murders.” Officials acknowledge the change. “In all candor, officers are not as aggressive as they once were, pre-2015. It’s just that fact,” says acting Police Commissioner Gary Tuggle. He blames a shortage of patrol officers and the fallout from a blistering 2016 Justice Department investigation. Tuggle said Wednesday that he is bolstering the department’s patrol ranks by almost 20 percent.”

Crime Decreased in Baltimore

No one is defending bad or brutal or corrupt cops, they are a plague upon society. But officers did not create the policy of aggressive enforcement. Why would they? Every stop puts officers at risk of harm and negative publicity. Try being a cop; just responding to calls and doing routine patrol is immensely hard per data on police PTSD, exposure to violence, stress, and suicides.

The city and surrounding areas were sick of the crime and grime and the detrimental impact on everything from the economy to schools to tourism. Aggressive policing was embraced by community leaders, churches, politicians and state officials as necessary. The media played its part in promoting it. Everyone wanted the success in New York City to come to Baltimore.

Crime and violence in Baltimore decreased after implementation. Advocates thought themselves vindicated.

The Critics

In response to the USA Today article, there are critics who harshly blame officers for the resulting crime and disorder in Baltimore. Some try to be fair but their reporting gives no mention of the once solid community and political support for aggressive policing.

There were opponents suggesting that proactive policing was having a detrimental impact on communities, and the media covered their concerns, but the stories failed to gain traction.

The interesting thing is that there is little to no suggestion by critics as to what Baltimore cops (or officers elsewhere) should be doing other than “reengaging.”

They don’t clearly state what that means; it’s like suggesting that you should be a little bit pregnant. Either you engage in proactive, self-initiated policing or you don’t.

Regardless of the modality used, proactive policing isn’t pretty. It requires listening to community priorities, judgment, and force.

The critics still don’t say whether proactive policing is a good or bad thing; there are vague references to doing “something different.” That is cowardly commentary.

In the harshest language possible, they blame all cops for doing bad things. If you are willing to engage in the stereotyping of 900,00 American police officers, you are capable of any related “isms.”

Two reactions to the USA Today study are offered (edited for brevity):

Cato Institute: “This morning, *USA Today* published [an article by Brad Heath](#) that examined data showing Baltimore (City) Police Department (BPD) activity slowed at the same time Baltimore homicides infamously spiked since 2015. The piece is worth reading in full and the data deserves a more detailed response, but at the outset it’s important to note what the data do not say.

“Several comments by current and former members of the BPD quoted in the piece say that front line officers are unwilling to do their jobs because of the public backlash to Freddie Gray’s death. Recall that, following a chase, several Baltimore police officers shackled Freddie Gray but left him unsecured in the back of a police van—strongly resembling [what is colloquially known as a “rough ride,”](#) an unofficial retaliation for making police officers chase someone, also known as a [“run tax”](#)—and Gray consequently died of a broken neck suffered in that van.

“The [subsequent though unsuccessful criminal prosecutions](#) of the BPD officers involved for what looked like an illegal extrajudicial punishment that led to a man’s death, apparently, discourages front line officers from being proactive to keep the community safe. And, one way to look at the *USA Today* data is to say that, as a consequence of this slow down, murder rates have jumped precipitously.

“It is a damning indictment indeed if BPD officers feel they need the freedom to needlessly kill Baltimore residents to do their jobs effectively.

“The data certainly shows a work slow-down by Baltimore officers and that slow-down may, in fact, be one factor that partially contributes to the rise in homicides. But that front-line officers feel this way about the people they are sworn to protect reflects a mindset that is anathema to positive police-community relations and thus endangers the community that has no reason to trust its police force.

“Rather than being the cause of Baltimore’s murder spike, the BPD work slow-down is more likely just one symptom of an unhealthy departmental culture. As a result, that department has repeatedly proven itself unworthy of the public trust and the community suffers greatly because of it,” [Cato Institute](#).

Washington Post Opinion: “It’s always been odd that people who argue for the Ferguson Effect do so in *defense* of law-enforcement officers. The argument here is that if we criticize bad cops, if we bring some transparency to policing, if we start to hold abusive, racist and dangerous cops more accountable, then the good cops will stop doing their jobs. It paints police as either incredibly sensitive or vindictive. Neither is a good look.

“And the people pushing these views know (or at least should know) that policing is getting safer. Yet they claim that the job getting more dangerous because it’s politically advantageous for them to do so. They say this while believing that if cops think the job is getting more dangerous, they will stop policing proactively. They *also* believe that a reduction in proactive policing will cause an increase in violent crime. It’s hard to escape the conclusion that the people making this argument are sacrificing lives to gain political points.

“Fortunately, the link between de-policing and homicide isn’t nearly so clear cut.

“So does this prove that the alternate Ferguson Effect caused Baltimore’s spike in murders? Not at all. It’s just an alternate theory that ought to make us question the dominant theory.

“[A]ll we can say for sure about Baltimore is that the city’s police have long had a reputation for aggressive, proactive, law enforcement and a reputation of disregard for individual rights. Probably not coincidentally, city police also have long had a contentious and adversarial relationship with the city’s black and Latino residents. All the while, the city has remained one of the most dangerous in the country. Maybe it’s time for a different approach,” [Washington Post Opinion](#).

Are There Lessons?

Are there lessons regarding cops disengaging? Is there a way to get them back to proactive policing? Do we want them to return to aggressive policing?

The pushback from criminologists, the media, and many others as to the concept of police officers “disengaging” from proactive policing is profound.

First, proactive policing was reexamined and found to be an effective strategy for crime control. Proactive or self-initiated policing has the backing of research as to lowering violent crime, [Crime in America](#).

But a return to aggressive policing isn’t in the cards in many communities regardless as to the worthiness of the data. There is a tremendous risk with every stop, but why endanger your life and open yourself to harsh criticism if not supported by the public? If “the community that has no reason to trust its police force,” why take chances?

Remember that this was the same community demanding aggressive police tactics. “You tell me to do it and then you harshly criticize me for doing what you asked,” is the sentiment of many officers. How can trust be built under these circumstances?

It’s important to note that police-community relations flow both ways. Let the communities involved tell cops exactly what they want. Let them put it in writing. Let communities take some responsibility for their own safety and the results of policies they want implemented.

Second, criminologists have been saying for decades that police actions had no relationship to crime going up or down. Police officers were thought to be irrelevant as to crime rates and totals. After Baltimore, a

fundamental tenant of criminology has to be reexamined. Many are still coming to grips with this development.

Third, cops are harshly criticized for their lack of inaction. But on the streets of Baltimore and many other cities, it's routine for officers to be surrounded with verbally hostile, smartphone holding citizens recording every arrest. Under this scrutiny, why would any cop risk their lives and reputations? If the job of cops is to listen to the community; then residents are expressing their sentiments loud and clear. Many are demanding inaction.

Forth, the vocal proponents of proactive policing have disappeared, leaving cops to take the blame. Media who saw the gradual implementation of aggressive tactics are nowhere to be found. Supportive politicians have disappeared. If there is support for a return to proactive policing, have the courage to take the lead with the specific actions desired.

Fifth, violent crime increased throughout the country by substantial margins, [Crime in America](#), and many believe that the increase continues today in multiple communities. Once again, what are the messages being given to cops in those communities?

Sixth, there is empirical national evidence of cops backing off, "About as many (72%) say officers in their department are now less willing to stop and question suspicious persons. Overall, more than eight-in-ten (86%) say police work is harder today as a result of high profile, negative incidents, [Crime in America](#). Arrests throughout the nation have plummeted, [Crime in America](#). Thus the issue is hardly Baltimore's; it's a national story. It's a national issue.

Finally, the debate comes down to cops and what they are prepared to do. The national media reports on police officers quitting and recruitment becoming difficult are many, [Crime in America](#). Loved ones are telling officer family members to get out of policing, and to get out now. Perceived injustice swings both ways.

If we want police-community reconciliation, the hard work of what should be done and how it should be done needs to begin now. Let there be public debates, but no one will do that because no one wants the responsibility to tell officers to return to proactivity.

The Future

So proactive policing is known to lower rates of crime but convincing cops to get back in the game is probably going nowhere except in communities perceived as supportive.

Cops want and expect accountability but it's clear that it's too late, those who can leave are doing just that. The others will respond to calls and engage in routine patrols.

To the critics, cops are the problem and their lack of proactivity is inexcusable. According to one, "It is a damning indictment indeed if BPD officers feel they need the freedom to needlessly kill Baltimore residents to do their jobs effectively." After that statement, officers and their families will simply disengage and leave.

Individual Baltimore cops didn't ask for proactive policing. Why would they? Every stop puts their lives and safety in jeopardy. Policing existed for decades predicated on quality arrests, not mass arrests. Mass arrests only came after community, media and political pressure.

Aggressive policing was demanded by community residents, religious leaders, businesspeople and practically everyone else. I attended community meetings in Baltimore where demands to clear the corners were a standard part of every gathering (and yes, they didn't care how they were cleared).

City residents suggested that the lack of aggressive action on the part of the police was yet another indication that they didn't care about residents or communities. Reporters witnessed these interactions; they wrote about them.

Yes, we all hate bad cops and we all disgusted by corruption, and officers who lack respect for the public should be fired.

But you can't demand dangerous and aggressive actions on the part of cops and walk away when the results turn sour. If there is blame, let it fall on the shoulders of every community leader and politician who demanded action to clear the corners of people who were driving residents crazy.

So for the first step, let those who demanded aggressive policing apologize to the officers involved. A hypothetical statement, "Yep, we asked for it, we demanded it, it didn't turn out well, and we're sorry that

you took the fall.”

Let the media explain their articles and reports on the New York City miracle while asking when we're going to do this in Baltimore.

Everyone thought that aggressive policing was the key to not just safer cities, but more prosperous metropolitan areas.

The critics are damning of officers and agencies but not one can provide a precise game plan for the future. They don't want the officers to sit idly by, they want more aggressive, self-initiated policing.

Thus the cycle repeats itself all over again.

Source of the USA Today Synopsis

The Crime Report at <http://www.thecrimereport.org>.

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Doing the Job is a difficult one, in order to do the job you much have the support of the citizens. While the community wants to be safe they don't want aggression, and all's good till someone in their family is arrested. All the Cops I've worked with genuinely want to help their community and try to be proactive and those who are over aggressive tend to weed themselves out with their own actions. It's a tough job that most don't understand, and most don't want any part of.

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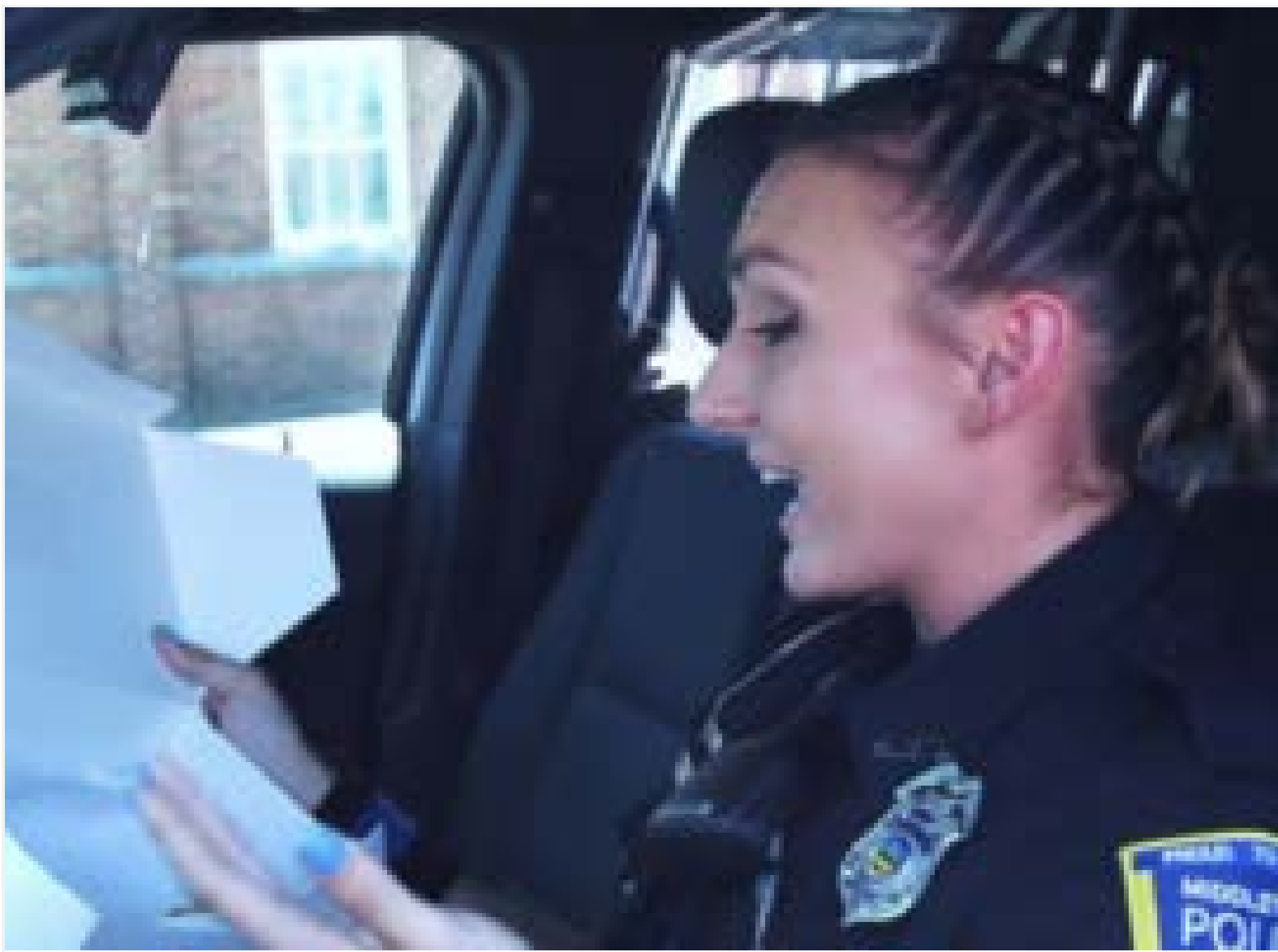
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