Ferguson, Baltimore, and the American Way of Life

Originally published at: https://policypress.wordpress.com/2015/05/20/ferguson-baltimore-and-the-american-way-of-life/

Published May 20, 2015

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It all started in Jamestown, Virginia about 100 years before the Revolutionary War. Or it all started in Ferguson, Missouri with the police shooting of Michael Brown. Whether it started with the beginning of black slavery in America in the 1600s or with a tragic act of violence on August 9, 2014 it is now consuming the nation. The United States is in revolt against police violence, and the leaders of that revolt are mostly young and black.

It should come as no surprise that many African-Americans are angry about the way they are treated by police. Based on my own calculations from official government statistics, at any one time more than 6 percent of all African-American men age 25-39 are in prison. I estimate that about one-quarter of all African-American men spend at least part of their lives in prison.

Criminalization of African-Americans

African-American men and women also face routine harassment of other kinds. Racial biases in hiring, housing, and credit are widespread and well-confirmed by academic research. African-Americans are stopped by police so often that the “crime” of driving while black has entered the English language. Such criminalization of African-Americans starts early. More than one-third of all African-American children have been suspended or expelled from school, according to statistics from the NAACP.

Then there is the ultimate penalty: death at the hands of the state. African-Americans account for more than one-third of all judicial executions, according to data from the Death Penalty Information Center. Judicial executions are relatively rare, about 40 per year. Many more African-Americans die at the hands of police without any hearing in court. No one knows how many African-Americans are killed by police each year. The government doesn’t bother to keep statistics.

The killings of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri and Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland are only the tip of a gruesome iceberg. Some of the many stories of African-American men and women killed by police in recent years have been collected by Rich Juzwiak and Aleksander Chan on Gawker.com. Of course, white Americans have also been killed by police, as conservatives are quick to point out. But the rates of aggressive policing targeted at blacks and whites are simply not comparable.

What the targets of aggressive policing do share is powerlessness: they tend to be blacker, younger, and poorer than the population as a whole. Very few white, middle-aged professionals ever face police violence. African-American youths without jobs are not the only targets of the police state, but they are targets for multiple reasons. Wearing multiple targets, they are at very high risk of becoming victims.

Aggressive policing leads to tragedies like the Michael Brown and Freddie Gray killings, but it harms Americans of all kinds in many smaller ways. America is not a country at war and it does not need a militarized, shoot-on-sight police force. A return to the civilian ethic in policing would be welcomed by all of society. Police officers should be the friendly neighborhood helpers of children’s mythology, not armed warriors ready to shoot.
For half a century the Los Angeles Police Department has branded itself with the motto “To Protect and to Serve.” They are the right ideals for a police department. The LAPD itself has rarely lived up to those ideals, but we can’t blame the LAPD, the Ferguson police, or the Baltimore police if they fall short. Police practices reflect government priorities. When you call the cable company and get terrible customer service you don’t blame the operator. Similarly when police behave badly the problem isn’t the person; it’s the policy.

America needs a whole new approach to social policy, one based on progressive principles of self-actualization instead of conservative principles of social control. The police state is all about social control. Conservatives like to wrap social control in a glorious flag of patriotism, but the patriotic American tradition of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness is much more about self-actualization. The protesters in Ferguson and Baltimore aren’t demonstrating against police violence. They are demonstrating in favor of the American way of life.