

Freddie Gray: Don't let the 1% determine police reform for the 99%

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Expert panels led by technocrats can never address the deep flaws in the police system that affect the poor and communities of color most

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The history of policing in the US has been one of protecting private property, money and lives of the affluent and politically powerful, at least since the NYPD's founding in 1845. Any new efforts at police reform - calls for which are growing stronger with each new death of an unarmed person of color at the hands of the police - will be unsuccessful if they exclude revisions to this most basic of reasons for the existence of modern law enforcement.

Freddie Gray is just the latest in a long list of men and women of color who have died during a police encounter in the last year, a list that already includes Walter Scott, Eric Garner, Miriam Carey, Tamir Rice, Antonio Zambrano-Montes and Michael Brown. Some have suggested that one possible solution is the introduction of police body cameras, which are far from being the panacea they are made out to be - the purchase and maintenance of which just happen to benefit corporations. That is why it is vital that any efforts to fix our broken police departments are not one-off trends promoted by and for the benefit of elites.

One can already imagine the White House bringing together a group of billionaire philanthropists, former politicians and Ivy League graduates trained in data mining to form a commission that would allow them to impose their own ideas of police reform across the country. New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton, now-former US attorney general Eric Holder, legal analyst Jeffrey Toobin and philanthropists such as Bill Gates, Michael Bloomberg and George Soros are exactly the kind of figures who would populate this kind of body.

These self-chosen stewards would likely proceed to seek recommendations from a few handpicked law professors, ex-police officers and law enforcement agencies on how to raise policing standards. This group of leaders, technocrats and do-gooder billionaires may even come up with a workable value-added metrics system for evaluating police effectiveness annually - but their efforts would ultimately fail us.

We should never expect expert panels led by technocrats who are far removed from the

poor and communities of color to address deep flaws in the police system. For one, their socioeconomic and racial distance would make it next to impossible for them to develop evaluations and other reforms responsive to the needs of such communities. The heavy influence from America's rich and powerful on law enforcement means that any reform efforts at making police less militarized will conflict with the charge to protect private property - especially businesses - and those who wield the most money and political influence.

To even begin to make inroads on police reform, we need trusted representatives of the interest of the poor and communities of color to be involved. Organizations like the ACLU, the Center for Social Inclusion, The Sentencing Project and Dream Defenders - along with individuals like Maya Wiley, DeRay McKesson and Michelle Alexander - would be a place to start.

Even with the inclusion of these unusual suspects, failed police reforms are a real possibility. Fad ideas from the "broken windows" integration of public services to President Bill Clinton's push for 100,000 additional police officers nationwide in 1994 did little to make the poor and communities of color feel secure, even with all-time lows in violent crimes in most cities in the US. Poor, blacks, and Latinos suffered in the last two decades from being disproportionately targeted by policies like "stop and frisk". This discrimination was permitted because it made whites feel safer - so much so that affluent whites have been moving back into what had been impoverished communities of color in major cities across the US. And they have brought with them the expectation of greater police presence to protect their property in the gentrification process.

Businesses and rich and powerful whites, who want their property and lives protected, are the cornerstone for policing and remain the main constituents involved in police reform. With the great divide between them and the poor and communities of color, any attempt at reforms are doomed.

Many white Americans still buy into stereotypes around the poor and people of color as criminals. That's a big reason why they stand steadfast with law enforcement despite their abuses. It's also why NYPD officer Daniel Pantaleo, who put Eric Garner in a plain-for-all-to-see illegal chokehold last July, was not indicted by a grand jury. Journalists like CNN's Wolf Blitzer, Don Lemon and Erin Burnett and other media voices like Joe Scarborough, Charles Krauthammer, Rudy Giuliani and Nicholas Kristof aren't helping when they turn every incidence of police abuse into questions of perfect victims, perfect protests and sacrosanct police officers.

It has often taken a series of major riots for law enforcement and affluent whites to get the message that police are not only there to serve them and their interests. Everyone deserves fair protection. Let's hope that it doesn't take more bloodshed for all of us to realize that.

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