

Why just blaming cops won't help Baltimore

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By Peter Moskos

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Looting, fires and violence descended on Baltimore. Like most who know and love that city, I was heartbroken. I was once a cop in Baltimore.

Police, trying to save their city last weekend, were blamed both for doing too little and for doing too much. The ghetto, and I'm talking class and not race, was on full display by Monday. The whole nation saw beautiful Baltimore at its worst.

The protests started in response to the death of Freddie Gray in police hands. We still don't know what happened to Freddie Gray. Something bad happened. There's an investigation. Maybe the investigation should be going faster. But maybe rushing the investigation would compromise prosecution. (And forced testimony can't be used in prosecution; police officers too have constitutional rights as criminal defendants.) I don't know.

Here's the thing: Police officers who weren't there don't know what happened to Freddie Gray.

If there are criminally guilty cops, police have no problem with justice. But those who caused destruction on Monday had little, if anything, to do with Freddie Gray protests. They were, as the mayor put it, thugs. Call them what you will, normally what happens in the hood stays in the hood.

Those who cut fire hoses and burned down homes and businesses? Police deal with them every day, literally. Those criminals didn't just appear on Monday, and they won't be gone tomorrow. They live there, without jobs, education, mainstream social skills, or hope.

They don't come from stable families. They don't go to church. Most violent criminals are actively or passively involved in the drug trade. In Baltimore this year -- just like last year and just like next year -- police will arrest tens of thousands of poor black men, mostly on drug charges. From the same pool, 200 will be shot and killed. Another 200 will do the killing.

These are communities, like the Baltimore's Eastern District, in which more than 10% of men are murdered. If all of America had homicide levels found in parts of Baltimore, there would be over 300,000 murders per year (as opposed to the still shamefully high 12,000 homicides in America).

And yet some continue to think of police as the main problem rather than part of the solution. But Baltimore is not Ferguson. The police department is 50% non-white. The mayor is black. So is the police commissioner. The city is 65% African-American.

So imagine you're a young white cop, as I was, in a rough neighborhood. A nice retired African-American gentleman calls 911 because the kids in front of his house, also black, are rowdy, breaking bottles, selling drugs, and otherwise being disrespectful. Just out of the police academy, I pulled up to countless of these situations.

What to do? Usually I stopped, stared, and they moved on. Sometimes I would get out of my car. But I shouldn't have to. We all played by the same rules. It's about respect. Sometimes I would ask politely. Sometimes I had to order rudely. Sometimes I would ask for ID. Sometimes I would frisk, search, or arrest. That's what cops do. Every day. That's what I did. I had to. That was my job.

Ultimately police are in a no-win situation. And when things go wrong, they go wrong fast. People run. There are fights. Guns. People get hurt. Sometimes people die. Sometimes -- not very often -- it's the police officer's fault.

But even if there were no racist or brutal cops -- if every cop were a polite, fit, college-educated, bilingual, African-American gentleman or woman -- this wouldn't solve the greater problems of the ghetto or even police abuse. Police abuse has less to do with race than poverty and class. And police will never solve the problems of absent parents, mass incarceration, or a violence culture centered around the economics of drug prohibition.

Even so, rather than face up to our problems, we call for the cops to do something, anything. Yes, bad cops need to be punished. But it's too easy to blame police for all our problems. Problems police did not cause and cannot solve. And then when a cop makes a mistake, as one inevitably will, we jump on all police with a confident smugness and unbecoming glee.

The problems in policing mirror the problems of society. We can and should improve police. The best way to do that is to improve society. True justice requires us to look both inward for blame and outward to the suffering around us. The worst thing we could do is nothing at all.