

Putting the Wrong Face on Today's Cycle of Police Violence

By Sanford F. Schram

On December 20, 2014, an African American male allegedly shot his girlfriend in Baltimore came to New York City and shot dead, execution style, two police officers, Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu, as they sat in a patrol car. Ismaaiyl Brinsley had posted on social media his intention to take out two police officers in response to the death of Eric Garner who had been killed in Staten Island when police tried to arrest him this past July. A grand jury had refused to indict the police officer (Daniel Pantaleo) who used a banned chokehold when he tried to arrest Garner, just as a grand jury in St. Louis, Missouri, had less than two weeks before failed to indict police officer Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown with whom Wilson had an altercation on a residential street in the Missouri town of Ferguson. The two non-indictments of these police officers were preceded and followed by others and set off protests and demonstrations across the country and especially in New York City. A resident of the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood where the killing of the two patrolmen took place told a reporter: "We need to look at how we got here."

Here can be described variously, but one description is the current point on the escalating cycle of violence between the police and the African American males they encounter on the street. For months, we seemed to be at that point in the cycle where every day another black male was put to death by police under questionable circumstances. Now we cycled quickly to where a black male had turned the tables to killing police officers. This turn of events was most unfortunate on multiple levels. The escalation of violence through acts of vengeance is never good. The death of respected police officers is something to be mourned. The implications for breaking the cycle of violence via reforms in policing are perhaps equally dire.

Ismaaiyl Brinsley was not an activist protesting for police reform, but he was not a stranger to encounters with the police. He had lived a troubled short life. His social media posts nonetheless imply he saw himself as bonded with others at war with the police, whose treatment of African American males, especially in poorer communities, has come under increased scrutiny in response to the spate of recent reports of African American males suffering death at the hands of the police. In response, the prevailing police insistence that their treatment of the people they encounter is not racially biased and is in fact necessary to maintain law and order in socially disorganized communities has increasingly been also seen as suspect. That was until the killing of the two police officers.

Prior to the double murder, Michael Brown and Eric Garner had come to personify the push for reform of the police. Michael Brown and Eric Garner were killed by police under questionable circumstances, where longstanding issues of police brutality and racial profiling were put front and center. The failure of grand juries to indict further heightened the outrage that law enforcement more generally had to change. The subsequent protests were spreading and drawing

more and more support across communities and from leaders in government, education, sports and the arts.

Some complained that the misbehavior of Brown and Garner made them less than ideal for personalizing the cause of police reform. Social scientist Glenn Loury contrasted the current reform movement with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s by saying “Michael Brown is not Rosa Parks,” the woman whose refusal to sit in the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, kicked off the Civil Rights Movement. Yet, both Brown and Garner represented effectively how African American males in marginalized communities in recent years struggle mightily with the persistent presence of police who constantly monitor their behavior as part of zero tolerance, stop and frisk, and “broken windows” policies that operate under the misguided assumption that to strictly enforce behavioral regulation prevents future crimes. The back stories of those who have suffered police violence in these situations it turns out speak volumes about how the police are tasked to keep a lid on poor black communities where legitimate opportunities for advancement remain minimal years after the Civil Rights Movement passed away. Those personal life stories are important to seeing the folly of current police practices and the misplaced role of aggressive policing in these situations. For that reason some people better represent the struggle to address this tragedy. On multiple levels, symbolizing the struggle via the stories of Michael Brown and Eric Garner is infinitely preferable to having Brinsley’s sad but twisted tale to be the way the movement gets personalized. With Brinsley as the face of the movement, the only result can be its demonization.

Now, suddenly we must indeed confront the possibility that efforts to make Brinsley the face of the protest movement have succeeded in spite of its many disavowals of violence and mantra-like calls to practice non-violent protest. The police and those who continue to support current police practice have been handed a golden opportunity to demonize the protesters as purveyors of violence. If they succeed there is a real possibility of derailing serious consideration of how we as a society allow for the continuation of the police’s mistreatment of the African American males they confront on the street, especially in those poorer communities where complaints of police tactics have been most vocal.

Sometimes the process of getting social change can seem so mysterious. Can it really be that the actions of one man, one lone, disenchanted person upend a budding protest movement against police violence? It might just be. As Kareem Abdul-Jabbar’s excellent essay published in days after the police killings in [Time](#) noted there was a rush to exploit the deaths of the officers for political effect. New York City Police Commissioner William Bratton blamed the protests for inciting Brinsley to kill cops. Quickly responding, the beleaguered Mayor Bill de Blasio, denounced by critics for sympathizing with the protesters, has called for the protests to take a time out. Not satisfied the police and their supporters staged their own protests to try to deflect attention away from themselves in the name of protecting law and order.

Yet in the process, we get distracted from reforming the police and actually what it will really take to address the root cause of the injustice we are now witnessing almost daily. As Ta-Nehisi Coates insightfully noted in [The Atlantic](#), focusing strictly on reforming the police overlooks that many citizens support questionable police practices as a way of avoiding confronting the racial injustice built into how we have allowed our society to evolve in the years after the Civil Rights Movement.

In other words, who becomes the face of a protest movement matters because it suggests what the movement sees is the issue and what should be done about it. Back in the days of the Civil Rights Movement, sympathy built among whites when unfairly harmed blacks were the face of the Movement. But today opponents have succeeded in making a cop killer the face of the movement against police violence. As a result, the longstanding hopes for reform not just of policing but society more generally have been once again been deferred, even as the killing of African American males under questionable circumstances continues. Ismaaiyl Brinsley's entrance on the scene post-dates the events that animated the upsurge in protest against police violence. And even though his behavior in no way represented the movement's tactics and goals, his irrational rage became the pretext to derail efforts to demilitarize the way policing in black neighborhoods gets conducted. Brinsley was the wrong face for efforts to break this disturbing cycle of violence that must start anew focused on reforming the police but go beyond it to reforming society writ large. No matter how you look at it, the challenges of the Civil Rights Movement are still with us.

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