

The Danger of the “Black Lives Matter” Movement

Heather Mac Donald

Manhattan Institute

Heather Mac Donald is the Thomas W. Smith Fellow at the Manhattan Institute and a contributing editor of *City Journal*. She earned a B.A. from Yale University, an M.A. in English from Cambridge University, and a J.D. from Stanford Law School. She writes for several newspapers and journals, including *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The New Criterion*, and *Public Interest*, and is the author of three books, including *Are Cops Racist?* and *The War on Cops: How The New Attack on Law and Order Makes Everyone Less Safe* (forthcoming June 2016).

The following is adapted from a speech delivered on April 27, 2016, at Hillsdale College’s Allan P. Kirby, Jr. Center for Constitutional Studies and Citizenship in Washington, D.C., as part of the AWC Family Foundation Lecture Series.

For almost two years, a protest movement known as “Black Lives Matter” has convulsed the nation. Triggered by the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, the Black Lives Matter movement holds that racist police officers are the greatest threat facing young black men today. This belief has triggered riots, “die-ins,” the murder and attempted murder of police officers, a campaign to eliminate traditional grand jury proceedings when police use lethal force, and a presidential task force on policing.

Even though the U.S. Justice Department has resoundingly disproven the lie that a pacific Michael Brown was shot in cold blood while trying to surrender, Brown is still venerated as a martyr. And now police officers are backing off of proactive policing in the face of the relentless venom directed at them on the street and in the media. As a result, violent crime is on the rise.

The need is urgent, therefore, to examine the Black Lives Matter movement’s central thesis—that police pose the greatest threat to young black men. I propose two counter hypotheses: first, that there is no government agency more dedicated to the idea that black lives matter than the police; and second, that we have been talking obsessively about alleged police racism over the last 20 years in order to avoid talking about a far larger problem—black-on-black crime.

Let's be clear at the outset: police have an indefeasible obligation to treat everyone with courtesy and respect, and to act within the confines of the law. Too often, officers develop a hardened, obnoxious attitude. It is also true that being stopped when you are innocent of any wrongdoing is infuriating, humiliating, and sometimes terrifying. And needless to say, every unjustified police shooting of an unarmed civilian is a stomach-churning tragedy.

Given the history of racism in this country and the complicity of the police in that history, police shootings of black men are particularly and understandably fraught. That history informs how many people view the police. But however intolerable and inexcusable every act of police brutality is, and while we need to make sure that the police are properly trained in the Constitution and in courtesy, there is a larger reality behind the issue of policing, crime, and race that remains a taboo topic. The problem of black-on-black crime is an uncomfortable truth, but unless we acknowledge it, we won't get very far in understanding patterns of policing.

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Every year, approximately 6,000 blacks are murdered. This is a number greater than white and Hispanic homicide victims combined, even though blacks are only 13 percent of the national population. Blacks are killed at six times the rate of whites and Hispanics combined. In Los Angeles, blacks between the ages of 20 and 24 die at a rate 20 to 30 times the national mean. Who is killing them? Not the police, and not white civilians, but other blacks. The astronomical black death-by-homicide rate is a function of the black crime rate. Black males between the ages of 14 and 17 commit homicide at ten times the rate of white and Hispanic male teens combined. Blacks of all ages commit homicide at eight times the rate of whites and Hispanics combined, and at eleven times the rate of whites alone.

The police could end all lethal uses of force tomorrow and it would have at most a trivial effect on the black death-by-homicide rate. The nation's police killed 987 civilians in 2015, according to a database compiled by *The Washington Post*. Whites were 50 percent—or 493—of those victims, and blacks were 26 percent—or 258. Most of those victims of police shootings, white and black, were armed or otherwise threatening the officer with potentially lethal force.

The black violent crime rate would actually predict that *more* than 26 percent of police victims would be black. Officer use of force will occur where the police interact most often with violent criminals, armed suspects, and those resisting arrest, and that is in black neighborhoods. In America's 75 largest counties in 2009, for example, blacks constituted 62 percent of all robbery defendants, 57 percent of all murder defendants, 45 percent of all assault defendants—but only 15 percent of the population.

Moreover, 40 percent of all cop killers have been black over the last decade. And a larger proportion of white and Hispanic homicide deaths are a result of police killings than black homicide deaths—but don't expect to hear that from the media or from the political enablers of the Black Lives Matter movement. Twelve percent of all white and Hispanic homicide victims are killed by police officers, compared to four percent of all black homicide victims. If we're going to have a "Lives Matter" anti-police movement, it would be more appropriately named "White and Hispanic Lives Matter."

Standard anti-cop ideology, whether emanating from the ACLU or the academy, holds that law enforcement actions are racist if they don't mirror population data. New York City illustrates why that expectation is so misguided. Blacks make up 23 percent of New York City's population, but they commit 75 percent of all shootings, 70 percent of all robberies, and 66 percent of all violent crime, according to victims and witnesses. Add Hispanic shootings and you account for 98 percent of all illegal gunfire in the city. Whites are 33 percent of the city's population, but they commit fewer than two percent of all shootings, four percent of all robberies, and five percent of all violent crime. These disparities mean that virtually every time the police in New York are called out on a gun run—meaning that someone has just been shot—they are being summoned to minority neighborhoods looking for minority suspects.

Officers hope against hope that they will receive descriptions of white shooting suspects, but it almost never happens. This incidence of crime means that innocent black men have a much higher chance than innocent white men of being stopped by the police because they match the description of a suspect. This is not something the police choose. It is a reality forced on them by the facts of crime.

The geographic disparities are also huge. In Brownsville, Brooklyn, the per capita shooting rate is 81 times higher than in nearby Bay Ridge, Brooklyn—the first neighborhood predominantly black, the second neighborhood predominantly white and Asian. As a result, police presence and use of proactive tactics are much higher in Brownsville than in Bay Ridge. Every time there is a shooting, the police will flood the area looking to make stops in order to avert a retaliatory shooting. They are in Brownsville not because of

racism, but because they want to provide protection to its many law-abiding residents who deserve safety.

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Who are some of the victims of elevated urban crime? On March 11, 2015, as protesters were once again converging on the Ferguson police headquarters demanding the resignation of the entire department, a six-year-old boy named Marcus Johnson was killed a few miles away in a St. Louis park, the victim of a drive-by shooting. No one protested his killing. Al Sharpton did not demand a federal investigation. Few people outside of his immediate community know his name.

Ten children under the age of ten were killed in Baltimore last year. In Cleveland, three children five and younger were killed in September. A seven-year-old boy was killed in Chicago over the Fourth of July weekend by a bullet intended for his father. In November, a nine-year-old in Chicago was lured into an alley and killed by his father's gang enemies; the father refused to cooperate with the police. In August, a nine-year-old girl was doing her homework on her mother's bed in Ferguson when a bullet fired into the house killed her. In Cincinnati in July, a four-year-old girl was shot in the head and a six-year-old girl was left paralyzed and partially blind from two separate drive-by shootings. This mindless violence seems almost to be regarded as normal, given the lack of attention it receives from the same people who would be out in droves if any of these had been police shootings. As horrific as such stories are, crime rates were much higher 20 years ago. In New York City in 1990, for example, there were 2,245 homicides. In 2014 there were 333—a decrease of 85 percent. The drop in New York's crime rate is the steepest in the nation, but crime has fallen at a historic rate nationwide as well—by about 40 percent—since the early 1990s. The greatest beneficiaries of these declining rates have been minorities. Over 10,000 minority males alive today in New York would be dead if the city's homicide rate had remained at its early 1990s level.

What is behind this historic crime drop? A policing revolution that began in New York and spread nationally, and that is now being threatened. Starting in 1994, the top brass of the NYPD embraced the then-radical idea that the police can actually prevent crime, not just respond to it. They started gathering and analyzing crime data on a daily and then hourly basis. They looked for patterns, and strategized on tactics to try to quell crime outbreaks

as they were emerging. Equally important, they held commanders accountable for crime in their jurisdictions. Department leaders started meeting weekly with precinct commanders to grill them on crime patterns on their watch. These weekly accountability sessions came to be known as Compstat. They were ruthless, high tension affairs. If a commander was not fully informed about every local crime outbreak and ready with a strategy to combat it, his career was in jeopardy.

Compstat created a sense of urgency about fighting crime that has never left the NYPD. For decades, the rap against the police was that they ignored crime in minority neighborhoods. Compstat keeps New York commanders focused like a laser beam on where people are being victimized most, and that is in minority communities. Compstat spread nationwide. Departments across the country now send officers to emerging crime hot spots to try to interrupt criminal behavior before it happens.

In terms of economic stimulus alone, no other government program has come close to the success of data-driven policing. In New York City, businesses that had shunned previously drug-infested areas now set up shop there, offering residents a choice in shopping and creating a demand for workers. Senior citizens felt safe to go to the store or to the post office to pick up their Social Security checks. Children could ride their bikes on city sidewalks without their mothers worrying that they would be shot. But the crime victories of the last two decades, and the moral support on which law and order depends, are now in jeopardy thanks to the falsehoods of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Police operating in inner-city neighborhoods now find themselves routinely surrounded by cursing, jeering crowds when they make a pedestrian stop or try to arrest a suspect. Sometimes bottles and rocks are thrown. Bystanders stick cell phones in the officers' faces, daring them to proceed with their duties. Officers are worried about becoming the next racist cop of the week and possibly losing their livelihood thanks to an incomplete cell phone video that inevitably fails to show the antecedents to their use of force. Officer use of force is never pretty, but the public is clueless about how hard it is to subdue a suspect who is determined to resist arrest.

As a result of the anti-cop campaign of the last two years and the resulting push-back in the streets, officers in urban areas are cutting back on precisely the kind of policing that led to the crime decline of the 1990s and 2000s. Arrests and summons are down, particularly for low-level offenses. Police officers continue to rush to 911 calls when there is already a victim. But when it comes to making discretionary stops—such as getting out of their cars and questioning people hanging out on drug corners at 1:00 a.m.—many cops worry that doing so could put their careers on the line. Police officers are, after all,

human. When they are repeatedly called racist for stopping and questioning suspicious individuals in high-crime areas, they will perform less of those stops. That is not only understandable—in a sense, it is how things *should* work. Policing is political. If a powerful political block has denied the legitimacy of assertive policing, we will get less of it.

On the other hand, the people demanding that the police back off are by no means representative of the entire black community. Go to any police-neighborhood meeting in Harlem, the South Bronx, or South Central Los Angeles, and you will invariably hear variants of the following: “We want the dealers off the corner.” “You arrest them and they’re back the next day.” “There are kids hanging out on my stoop. Why can’t you arrest them for loitering?” “I smell weed in my hallway. Can’t you do something?” I met an elderly cancer amputee in the Mount Hope section of the Bronx who was terrified to go to her lobby mailbox because of the young men trespassing there and selling drugs. The only time she felt safe was when the police were there. “Please, Jesus,” she said to me, “send more police!” The irony is that the police cannot respond to these heartfelt requests for order without generating the racially disproportionate statistics that will be used against them in an ACLU or Justice Department lawsuit.

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Unfortunately, when officers back off in high crime neighborhoods, crime shoots through the roof. Our country is in the midst of the first sustained violent crime spike in two decades. Murders rose nearly 17 percent in the nation’s 50 largest cities in 2015, and it was in cities with large black populations where the violence increased the most. Baltimore’s per capita homicide rate last year was the highest in its history. Milwaukee had its deadliest year in a decade, with a 72 percent increase in homicides. Homicides in Cleveland increased 90 percent over the previous year. Murders rose 83 percent in Nashville, 54 percent in Washington, D.C., and 61 percent in Minneapolis. In Chicago, where pedestrian stops are down by 90 percent, shootings were up 80 percent through March 2016.

I first identified the increase in violent crime in May 2015 and dubbed it “the Ferguson effect.” My diagnosis set off a firestorm of controversy on the anti-cop Left and in criminology circles. Despite that furor, FBI Director James Comey confirmed the Ferguson effect in a speech at the University of Chicago Law School last October. Comey decried

the “chill wind” that had been blowing through law enforcement over the previous year, and attributed the sharp rise in homicides and shootings to the campaign against cops. Several days later, President Obama had the temerity to rebuke Comey, accusing him (while leaving him unnamed) of “cherry-pick[ing] data” and using “anecdotal evidence to drive policy [and] feed political agendas.” The idea that President Obama knows more about crime and policing than his FBI director is of course ludicrous. But the President thought it necessary to take Comey down, because to recognize the connection between proactive policing and public safety undermines the entire premise of the anti-cop Left: that the police oppress minority communities rather than bring them surcease from disorder.

As crime rates continue to rise, the overwhelming majority of victims are, as usual, black—as are their assailants. But police officers are coming under attack as well. In August 2015, an officer in Birmingham, Alabama, was beaten unconscious by a convicted felon after a car stop. The suspect had grabbed the officer’s gun, as Michael Brown had tried to do in Ferguson, but the officer hesitated to use force against him for fear of being charged with racism. Such incidents will likely multiply as the media continues to amplify the Black Lives Matter activists’ poisonous slander against the nation’s police forces.

The number of police officers killed in shootings more than doubled during the first three months of 2016. In fact, officers are at much greater risk from blacks than unarmed blacks are from the police. Over the last decade, an officer’s chance of getting killed by a black has been 18.5 times higher than the chance of an unarmed black getting killed by a cop.

The favorite conceit of the Black Lives Matter movement is, of course, the racist white officer gunning down a black man. According to available studies, it is a canard. A March 2015 Justice Department report on the Philadelphia Police Department found that black and Hispanic officers were much more likely than white officers to shoot blacks based on “threat misperception,” i.e., the incorrect belief that a civilian is armed. A study by University of Pennsylvania criminologist Greg Ridgeway, formerly acting director of the National Institute of Justice, has found that black officers in the NYPD were 3.3 times more likely to fire their weapons at shooting scenes than other officers present. The April 2015 death of drug dealer Freddie Gray in Baltimore has been slotted into the Black Lives Matter master narrative, even though the three most consequential officers in Gray’s arrest and transport are black. There is no evidence that a white drug dealer in Gray’s circumstances, with a similar history of faking injuries, would have been treated any differently.

We have been here before. In the 1960s and early 1970s, black and white radicals

directed hatred and occasional violence against the police. The difference today is that anti-cop ideology is embraced at the highest reaches of the establishment: by the President, by his Attorney General, by college presidents, by foundation heads, and by the press. The presidential candidates of one party are competing to see who can out-demagogue President Obama's persistent race-based calumnies against the criminal justice system, while those of the other party have not emphasized the issue as they might have.

I don't know what will end the current frenzy against the police. What I do know is that we are playing with fire, and if it keeps spreading, it will be hard to put out.