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Diversity Alone Won't Stop Police Violence

The recent Post series documenting Prince George's County police as among the most brutal in the nation exposes a long-hidden truth: A racially diverse police force under the command of black elected officials is no guarantee against police violence.

The notion that racial diversity is the key to fighting police brutality has deep historical roots. In the wake of riots across American inner-cities in the 1960s, the Kerner Commission called for "increased Negro participation in police departments" because "for police in a Negro community to be predominately white can serve as a dangerous irritant."

But in Prince George's County, where the police force killed more people during the past decade than any police force in America, and where no officer during that time has been fired or demoted for shooting somebody, the police department is 41 percent African American. Moreover, the county that has become known as America's wealthiest black suburb has a black county executive and chief prosecutor. Nor is Prince George's alone: In recent years Los Angeles, Detroit and Washington all have suffered police misconduct scandals. Yet each of these cities has either significant black leadership or police force representation.

Neither black officers nor black elected officials have solved the problem of police misconduct. That we find this result so surprising says more about our country's specific racial history than it does about police misconduct. Police abuse and racism have become so intertwined in the minds of many Americans, particularly African Americans, that we assume the two must go together. Van Jones, founder of Bay Area Policewatch and the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights, points out the reality: "Most human rights abuses in the world

are perpetrated by people who look like the people they are abusing."

This is why racial diversity in police hiring will never by itself protect communities from police violence. Without independent oversight and meaningful accountability no police force, whatever the racial makeup, can identify and rid itself of the few rogue officers who cause the bulk of the trouble.

Whatever strategies are necessary for reform, black elected officials and police chiefs are no more willing to impose them than were the white officials they replaced. Some obstacles to reform are the predictable ones, including the awesome power of the Fraternal Order of Police. The FOP has blocked reform proposals and won protections for officers who shoot citizens. A notable FOP victory is legislation prohibiting investigators from interviewing an officer for 10 days after a shooting, giving the officer time to hire a lawyer and make sure his or her story is together.

But perhaps the most fundamental explanation for the complacency of black elected officials and police chiefs has been the complacency of the African American community. Like all elected officials, black officials respond to public outcry. But with some notable exceptions (including the influential talk radio host Joe Madison) there has been little pressure from within the Prince George's black community to hold black public officials accountable for police misconduct on their watch.

Some of the complacency stems from the fact that members of the black middle class have not been the principal victims of the most egregious abuse. Notably, the few cases in Prince George's County that got any public attention before The Post's exposé were those involving members of the middle class, whereas the overwhelming majority of cases involving poorer African Amer-



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ican victims remained invisible. African Americans, who have so long chastised America for its infatuation with white victims (such as Chandra Levy), while black missing persons are ignored, must begin to come to grips with the reality that the same double standard occurs within the black community.

Perhaps the most significant explanation for the absence of black pressure on black elected officials has been a desire not to publicly embarrass one of our own. Imagine if America's wealthiest black county were governed by a white county executive and white chief prosecutor and had an all-white police force. Imagine if this force led the nation in fatal shootings of mostly black men. As soon as this scandal was exposed there would be busloads of African American citizens and leaders descending on that county, crying, "No justice, no peace." But in Prince George's County's black community, there is mostly quiet.

It appears that after having fought for so long to gain a foothold in the political system, African Americans are afraid to jeopardize it by calling to task black officials. But this reaction is shortsighted: Gaining elected office is a means to an end, not an end itself. If black elected officials are unwilling to reform the police forces they inherit, then, like rogue officers of whatever color, they too must go. And the African American community must be willing to say so.

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