



Race relations in America and the case of Ferguson



Social Forces

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OCTOBER 26TH 2014

The fatal shooting of African-American teenager Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri during a police altercation in Augusts 2014, resulted in massive civil unrest and protests that received considerable attention from the United States and abroad. To gain further perspective on the situation in Ferguson and its implications of race relations in America, I spoke with **Wayne A. Santoro** and **Lisa Broidy**, authors of the article “[Gendered Rioting: A General Strain Theoretical Approach](http://oxford.ly/ZDFQzF) (<http://oxford.ly/ZDFQzF>)” published in *Social Forces* (<http://oxford.ly/1nbLrbg>). This articles is freely available for a limited time.

Why do you think there has been so much media attention on the situation in Ferguson following the Michael Brown shooting?

Police shootings and mistreatment of black citizens is not, unfortunately, an uncommon experience in the United States. Protests like street marches have become so routinized that at best they get covered in the back pages of the local newspaper. But what no one can ignore are protests that turn violent. Whether we call them riots or rebellions, they are front page news. They are dramatic and unpredictable, threaten life and property, and capture the media’s attention. Policymakers cannot ignore them. After all, it is not every day that a state governor calls out the National Guard to maintain law and order. And whether the public views the protestors in a sympathetic or unsympathetic manner, we are mesmerized by the ongoing drama. How long will the rioting last? How will law enforcement respond? What will be the cost in lives lost and property destroyed?

Why do you think that the shooting of Michael Brown sparked protest by citizens? What was unique about the circumstances in Ferguson, or the Michael Brown case?

Four factors stand out, some unique to the incident and to Ferguson while others are more typical. First, the single best predictor of black riots is police shootings or abuse of blacks by police. Indeed, in our research we find that a particularly strong predictor of joining a riot is having experienced police mistreatment personally. Police harassment is the spark that ignites protests that turn violent. This was a central conclusion of the famous 1968 Kenner Commission that studied black rioting in the late sixties.

Second, blacks in Ferguson have long complained about police harassment. Numerous blacks in Ferguson have recited to the media past experiences with police mistreatment. One resident recalled how he was roughed up by the police during a minor traffic stop. Another spoke of how she called the police for assistance only to have the police arrest her upon arrival. There was an incident in 2009 where a black man accused officers of beating him and then found out that he was subsequently charged with damaging government property by getting his blood on their police uniforms. Some of this mistreatment is suggested by data in Ferguson on race, traffic stops, and arrests.



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Blacks comprise 67% of Ferguson's population (in 2010) but account for 86% of all traffic stops by the police and 93% of all arrests resulting from these stops. Blacks are also twice as likely as white drivers to have the police search their car despite the fact that whites are more likely to have contraband found in their car.

(<http://ago.mo.gov/VehicleStops/2013/reports/161.pdf>). These data point to racially biased police practices. This is not unique to Ferguson, and in fact national survey data tell us that it is common knowledge among blacks that the police often act as agents of repression. For instance, in a *New York Times*/CBS News national survey conducted 10 days after the shooting, 45% of blacks report that they had personally experienced police discrimination because of their race (7% of whites report this experience). Similarly, 71% of blacks believe that local police are more likely to use deadly force against a black person (only 31% of whites agreed). Thus, it is a racially charged shooting of a black man within the context of widespread experiences of police racial abuse that fuel motivations for protest and the belief that the use of violence against the state is legitimate.

Third, the circumstances of the shooting matter. Was the shooting a legitimate or excessive use of police force? It is relevant that so many local blacks think that not only was Michael Brown unarmed (which is undisputed) but that he had his hands raised and was surrendering at the time of the shooting. What matters is not so much whether the “hands raised and surrendering” scenario is accurate (this likely will remain in dispute) but that so many local residents found it believable that a white police officer would shoot six times an unarmed black man trying to surrender. People believe narratives that resonate with their personal experiences and this again tells us something about what these personal experiences with the police have been.

Fourth, blacks in Ferguson have been excluded almost completely from positions of power. People protest when their voices are not being heard, and in Ferguson it appears that those who make policy decisions and influence police behavior are particularly deaf to the concerns of the black community. Referring to an incident where Ferguson officials were unresponsive to a relatively minor request, one black resident remarked “You get tired. You keep asking, you keep asking. Nothing gets done.” One arena where this exclusion is evident is in the police department. In the Ferguson police department only 3 (some report 4) of 53 commissioned officers — about 6% — are black. Recall that Ferguson is 67% black. Police departments are seldom responsive to minority communities when policy and street-level enforcement decisions are made solely by whites. Moreover, minority distrust of the police is likely when few police officers are minority. The racial power disparity is evident in elected positions as well. As Jeff Smith (2014) wrote in the *New York Times*, “Ferguson has a virtually all-white power structure: a white mayor; a school board with six white members and one Hispanic, which recently suspended a highly regarded young black superintendent who then resigned; a City Council with just one black member.” Access to political positions and direct influence into policymaking tend to channel discontent into institutional arenas. Protest is a marker that a population is politically marginalized. Protest is inherently a response to blocked access and influence over the political system.

To what degree is Ferguson unique as opposed to being emblematic of race relations in America?

Ferguson is more typical than atypical. There remains in the United States deep and enduring racial disparities in socioeconomic status, wealth, and well-being. No other population in the United States has experienced the degree of residential segregation from whites as have blacks. We imprison black men at a staggering rate. What the Kerner Commission stated nearly 50 years ago remains true today: we are a “nation of two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal.” This inequality has been noted repeatedly by black residents in Ferguson who see the local governing regime as unresponsive, the police force as hostile, and the school system as abysmal. Ferguson also is typical in that it reveals how views of racial progress and incidents like the shooting of Michael Brown are racially polarized. In the *New York Times*/CBS News survey noted above, 49% of blacks thought that the protests in Ferguson were about right or did not go far enough — only 19% of whites held such views.

In two ways, however, Ferguson seems atypical. First, in Ferguson the growth in the black population relative to whites is a recent occurrence. In 1990, blacks comprised 25% of the city’s population but that percentage grew to 52% in 2000 and 67% in 2010. This demographic transition was not followed by a corresponding transition in black access to political positions, the police force, union representation, and the like. Sociologists speak of the “backlash hypothesis,” meaning that when whites feel threatened such as by increases in the minority population they respond

with greater hostility to the “threatening” population. The recency of the demographic transition likely has altered the social and political dynamics of the city in ways that do not characterize other contemporary major cities in the United States especially those that are majority black like Detroit or Atlanta.



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Second, Ferguson is unusual in the degree that the city uses the municipal court system and the revenue it generates as a way to raise city funds. Court fines make up the second highest source of revenue for the city. This created a financial incentive to issue tickets and then impose excessive fees on people who did not pay. Data bear this out. Ferguson issued more than 1,500 warrants per 1,000 people in 2013 and this rate exceeds *all* other Missouri cities with a population larger than 10,000 people. To put this another way, Ferguson has a population of just over 21,000 people but issued more than 24,000 warrants which add up to three warrants per Ferguson household (<http://s3.documentcloud.org/documents/1279541/archcity-defenders-report-on-st-louis-county.pdf>). Writes Frances Robles (2014) in the *New York Times*: “Young black men in Ferguson and surrounding cities routinely find themselves passed from jail to jail as they are picked up on warrants for unpaid fines.” Thus, in Ferguson the primary interaction between many black residents and the police take place because of these warrants. Recent work on social movements has argued that such daily insults and humiliations can play a strong role in motivating people to protest, and certainly serve to undermine trust in the local police and city policymakers.

What will be the likely short- and longer-term consequences of the Ferguson protests?

Understanding how policymakers and others respond to a protest — especially one that turns violent — is complex. There is no typical response and historically one could cite examples of elites either trying to ameliorate the conditions that gave rise to the protest or responding in a more punitive manner. Nonetheless, in the short term there are reasons to think that policymakers will respond in ways favorable to the local black community by addressing some of their grievances. As political scientist James Button has written, policymakers tend to respond more favorably to riots when riots are large enough to garner public and media attention but not so severe and widespread to cause major societal disruption. This describes the Ferguson riots, unlike, for instance, the riots during the late 1960s in the United States. Moreover, policymakers who are sympathetic to minorities tend to respond in ways more favorable to minorities than less receptive policymakers. Social movement scholars refer to this as a favorable “political opportunity structure.” In the United States, the former tend to come from the ranks of the Democratic Party while the latter from the ranks of the Republican Party. Thus the fact that the Ferguson protests occurred during the Obama administration suggests a more ameliorative than punitive response, at least at the national level. It is not surprising that three times more blacks, 60% to 20%, report being satisfied rather than unsatisfied with how President Obama has responded to the situation in Ferguson.

There is some evidence that policymakers are indeed responding in ways favorable to the local black community and their grievances. For instance, Attorney General Eric H. Holder Jr. announced an independent investigation of the shooting and traveled to Ferguson to meet with investigators. Moreover, his office has started a civil rights investigation into whether the police have repeatedly violated the civil rights of residents. At the local level, some changes also are evident. The Ferguson City Council on 8 September agreed to establish a citizen review board to monitor the local police department. The city also has pledged that it would revamp its policy of using court fines to fund such a large share of its city budget. For instance, the city council has eliminated a \$50 warrant recall fee and a \$15 notification fee.

It is more of a leap of faith, however, to expect major long-term changes in Ferguson because of the insurgency. There remains, for instance, an on-going debate by scholars of the modern civil-rights movement (circa 1955-1968) as to whether the more than decade-long movement produced meaningful change in the lives of most blacks. If a decade of protests produced less than satisfactory change in the opinion of some, what chance do the Ferguson protests have? In particular, there is little reason to think that levels of black poverty, unemployment, underemployment, and educational disparities will improve noticeably in Ferguson unless other social forces are brought into play. These more substantive changes are more likely to be produced by years of community organizing, securing elected positions, joining governing political coalitions with sympathetic allies, and favorable economic conditions like the growth of blue-collar employment opportunities.



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Have white police shootings of minorities (or African-Americans) become more or less common in recent years?

This is an empirical question and the relevant data are limited. There are no national data on police shootings that do not result in death. National data on police shootings that result in death come from three sources: the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI), Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). However, data from each of these sources are limited. The FBI collects data on “justifiable homicide” by police as a voluntary component of the Supplemental Homicide Report data collected from police departments nationwide. Unfortunately few departments (less than 5%) voluntarily provide these data, leaving obvious questions about their representativeness and utility. Moreover, even if they were complete, these data would tell us little beyond the demographics of those killed. Particularly, we cannot discern the degree to which these incidents represent excessive use of force by police. BJS collects similar data on deaths that occur during an arrest. These data are collected at the state level and then reported to BJS. Compliance is better, with 48 states reporting. But it is not clear how complete or comparable the data from each state are.

Despite these short-comings, there is one inescapable conclusion: blacks are disproportionately killed in police shootings. For instance, blacks comprise 13% of the US population but represent 32% of those killed by police between 2003 and 2009 (<http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ard0309st.pdf>). The CDC compiles data from all death

certificates nationwide, which includes data on “deaths by legal intervention.” (<http://wonder.cdc.gov/>). Using the online query system for firearm deaths by legal intervention from 1999-2011, the average rate at which blacks are killed is more than double that of whites (0.2/100,000 compared to 0.1/100,000).

Is there anything else you think we can learn about race relations or racially motivated social movements in the United States from the case of Ferguson?

A few lessons. First, we often talk about the civil rights movement in the past tense. We think of it as something that happened; we might even debate why it “ended” and what it accomplished. But Ferguson reminds us that the struggle for racial justice continues. It is not always so newsworthy, but everyday many blacks and black advocacy organizations struggle to overcome racial barriers. Second, it underscores the deep racial divide in the United States. White and black views, especially concerning racial matters, are often polar opposite. Where whites see progress, blacks see setbacks. Where whites see black advancement, blacks see persistent racial disparities. Especially polarized are views on the criminal justice system and police. Third, there are costs to a society when a population is politically and economically marginalized. These costs may not always be apparent to outsiders nor make national headlines. But the price we pay for racial disparities is that violent protests will continue to be an enduring feature of the US landscape. The national memory of the Ferguson riots will fade only to be replaced by the next Ferguson-style protest. The question becomes what are we as individuals and as a collective willing to do to eradicate the racial inequality that motivates such protest?

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