



## **Baton Rouge and Ferguson: A Tale of Two Police Shootings**

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"We're not Ferguson."

The mantra has been heard often since the 2014 shooting of a black man by a white police officer in Ferguson led to weeks of protests and turned the Midwestern town into a symbol of police brutality and fractured race relations.

The latest echo came in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, where protesters last week and over the weekend took to the streets to decry the July 5 killing of a black man by white police.

"Baton Rouge is not Ferguson," East Baton Rouge District Attorney Hillard Moore said at a press conference after the shooting. "We have a completely different history."

Ferguson is a tiny suburb of the Midwestern U.S. city of St. Louis; Baton Rouge, the mid-sized capital of the southern state of Louisiana with a population 10 times Ferguson's.

But similarities are there, and they're hard to ignore: both are largely African-American towns that have a mostly white police force accused of fatally shooting an innocent black man. And there is more: dozens of arrests and a "militarized" show of force by the police in response to protests.

"I think it's a fair comparison," said Antonio Ginnata, U.S. Advocacy Director for Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Washington. "You're seeing a similar pattern: a questionable shooting by police of an African-American man that gives rise to frustrations and anger and grief by the community, that goes out and protests and the police react with a militarized response. There are worrying similarities."

HRW has been monitoring the situation in Baton Rouge, and had people on the ground in Ferguson two years ago.

Not all police shootings fit the pattern, say experts. The July 6 fatal police shooting of Philando Castile, an African-American who was stopped in his car for a broken taillight outside St. Paul,

Minnesota, has triggered as much outrage as the shooting in Baton Rouge. However, the incident was not caught on camera, although the aftermath was live-streamed on Facebook. Subsequent protests were relatively smaller, and the police response more measured.

## **Baton Rouge**

Baton Rouge was thrust into the national spotlight when police fatally shot Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old black CD vendor outside a convenience store after receiving a 911 call that a person with a gun was threatening another person.

A police search warrant filed Monday claimed that officers had spotted a handgun in Sterling's pocket and they saw him reach for it before shooting him. But the owner of the convenience store, who recorded one of two videos of the shooting, has disputed the police version. The U.S. Justice Department has opened a civil rights investigation into the shooting.

By all accounts, the first two days of protests that followed Sterling's shooting were peaceful. But then the protesters, joined by the radical New Black Panther Party and later by the Nation of Islam, upped the ante, assembling outside the headquarters of the Baton Rouge Police Department on Friday and veering onto a highway in what police described as a deliberate attempt to disrupt traffic.

To disperse the protesters, police put on a show of force. With a Long Range Acoustic Device (LRAD) emitting an ear-splitting sound from an armored personnel carrier, police in riot gear and gas masks moved to clear the highway, forcibly removing protesters. Some brandished assault rifles.

Some protesters panicked and screamed, "They're going to gas us."

All told, between 150 and 200 protesters were arrested over a three-day period, including Deray McKesson, nationally known leader of the Black Lives Matter movement. McKesson used the Periscope app to livestream the standoff and his own arrest.

### **'Military tactics'**

Protest leaders and many outside Baton Rouge slammed the police for resorting to what they described as "military tactics."

McKesson said the police tactics were provocative and even violent.

To one outside expert, they seemed excessive.

"The response seems much more militarized," said Jonathan Blanks, a research associate at Cato Institute and managing editor of *PoliceMisconduct.net*. "If you have police acting aggressively, some people will fight back."

In Baton Rouge, opinion remained divided.

"People who want to see a brutal police force, they see a brutal police force," said Peter Kovacs, the Baton Rouge-based editor of *The Advocate*, Louisiana's largest daily newspaper. "People who want to see lawless protesters, they see lawless protesters."

Baton Rouge is a racially and economically divided city, with a predominantly black and poor north side — where Sterling was killed — and a well-to-do, white south side.

"Historically, the people of color have not received the same type of justice that others have, and, unfortunately, that is the case in Baton Rouge," said Lori Martin, a professor of sociology at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge. "Like other cities, Baton Rouge has been attempting to address issues around race, especially as they relate to the plight of young black men."

A 2015 study commissioned by the Urban Congress of African American Males in Baton Rouge shows that more than half of black men in Baton Rouge drop out of high school before graduation. Fifty-four percent of black men without high school diplomas are likely to be unemployed, with a 70 percent chance of being incarcerated.

### **Dallas as role model**

The high rate of fatal police shootings in the U.S. has alarmed public officials in recent years. According to a *Washington Post* tally, 990 people were killed by police last year, and 515 have been fatally shot so far this year. Black Americans, who represent just 13 percent of the U.S. population, account for nearly one-third of the shootings.

The killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson and other high-profile shootings of black men sparked a national debate about police reform and race relations, leading President Barack Obama to create the Task Force on 21st Century Policing in December 2014. The group of police leaders, academics and activists produced a host of recommendations, ranging from adopting community policing to eliminating incentive-based quotas for arrests. But selling the plan to local law enforcement agencies has been an uphill battle.

That is because, unlike most countries, the U.S. doesn't have a national police force; policing in the country is carried out by local departments. Of an estimated 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the country, less than 1 percent is said to have embraced the recommendations.

Among model departments is the Dallas Police Department which, under a new leader, has adopted community policing and slashed both excessive force by police and assaults on police officers through training and techniques such as "de-escalation." Just before the July 7 sniper shooting that killed five of its men, DPD was tweeting clips of a peaceful rally and photos of smiling officers with protesters.

"That's what local departments should aspire to," Blanks said.

The Dallas Police Department's success was built on trust, he added.

"If you have a city that does not have the trust of the people, they're not going to get cooperation," Blanks said. "That leads to all sorts of problems."

### **Uncertain future**

The protests in Baton Rouge are likely to continue in one form or another in the days to come, as they did Monday when a small group led by the Nation of Islam gathered outside the convenience store where Sterling was killed last week.

Baton Rouge hasn't seen anything like this since 2015, when Hurricane Katrina drove tens of thousands of residents of New Orleans into the city, said *The Advocate's* Kovacs.

"Things are so chaotic, but I think most people here don't know what to expect in terms of whether the heat is dying down or not," he said. "And, also, there are more chapters in this: the funeral [and] the decision whether to prosecute" the police officers involved in the shooting.

Sterling's funeral is scheduled for Friday.