

# Rare™

## Under 40

### How federal policing reforms can be a distraction from real local progress

Bonnie Kristian

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At [National Interest](#), the Cato Institute's Tim Lynch explains why having the feds swoop in to fix every corrupt or dysfunctional police department is not the cure-all many make it out to be:

When the feds do intervene, everyone seems to be pleased. The heat is off the local officials to address police misconduct. They say they'll have to await the outcome of the federal investigation before taking any action. Federal officials are pleased because they are seen as the cavalry coming to the rescue. Civil rights activists are satisfied because they think a federal lawsuit will bring about needed reforms. The police department and police union benefit as well. The intense media scrutiny will now fade as the months roll past.

Instead, Lynch says, local politicians use calls for an investigation from Washington as an excuse to avoid doing the hard work of reform that ought to be *their* responsibility:

The optimal moment for police reform comes in the immediate aftermath of a police scandal. The public is aroused, and if the problems run deep into the department itself, voters want those problems corrected. Local politicians find themselves on the spot. They can't afford to appear uninterested, but they'd rather not fight the police department either. Instead of rolling up their sleeves to make some politically difficult decisions, they posture as reformers by joining the chorus calling for a federal civil rights investigation. [...]

Unfortunately, federal intervention has a counterproductive "enabling" effect: it allows local officials to evade their responsibility to fix broken police organizations. When the local politicians make a plea for federal intervention, it deflects attention away from their oversight failure and actually squanders the prospect for sweeping changes at a pivotal moment.

Earlier this year I spoke with Lynch's Cato colleague, Jonathan Blanks, for an article about criminal justice reform at The Week. Blanks similarly made the case that the most effective activism to improve a police department will typically happen at the local level.

"Police misconduct is inherently a local problem," he explained. "We have 18,000 police departments in the United States, and they're all going to have some sort of local control, and they're going to be guided by local ordinances or state laws."

Bringing in federal investigators may sometimes function as a useful step toward that local progress, but it doesn't work as a widespread solution. Not only does the Justice Department lack the resources to investigate all those 18,000 departments, but most of them will (hopefully) never have a dramatic, newsworthy brutality case which attracts federal attention.

Yet that doesn't mean they don't need reform. One of the most important things we learned from an independent investigation of police departments in small towns near Ferguson, Missouri is just how much local citizens are being gouged by something known as policing for profit.

This predatory practice saw law enforcement regularly harassing and jailing residents over minor violations like traffic stops, issuing fine after economically devastating fine to pad the city's pockets. It's taxation by another form, endlessly nitpicking at citizens' lives so municipal government can get a raise.

That's not a dramatic event which would bring in the feds, and it probably happens all over the place. So supporters of accountable, honest government must demand action from local politicians rather than waiting for them to get the chance to shirk their duty following a high-profile event.

As Blanks said, "Every community is going to have to come up with, 'What do we need the most? What's wrong with *our* police department?'"

"Sometimes adding body cameras will do it, he added. "Sometimes a switch at the chief level, at the administrative level, will bring wanted change. Other times it's deep-down, systemic problems—blue wall of silence, the whole mess—like you see in Chicago." In most places, we don't need the feds to help us find out.