



Baltimore riots drive tensions across many U.S. other cities

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Earlier this month, 25-year-old Freddie Gray, an African American man, was arrested in Baltimore for allegedly fleeing from officers. Gray was put into a police van and during the ride something happened that caused the officers to call for medical help. Upon arrival to the station, Gray could neither breathe nor talk. After being hospitalized, he died a week later.

Riots broke out earlier this week, just after Gray's funeral, and the state's National Guard troops were called in to restore order after looters ransacked stores, burnt down buildings and engaged in criminal mayhem, including battles with police that saw teen rioters hurling rocks at officers. Protests have spread to a number of cities nationwide, although most of those were peaceful.

There has been much media attention given to whether Gray was given a "rough ride" — an illegal police technique whereby the suspect is not secured in a police vehicle, and the driver speeds up, slams on his brakes and turns sharp corners in a bid to injure the suspect, as an unsecured passenger can slam his head against car or van windows, doors and interior walls.

The violence in Baltimore underscores a trend whereby many African Americans believe their race has made them a target of the police.

Statistics do not back up the claim that there is institutionalized racism on U.S. metropolitan police forces — black killings by police are down 70 percent in the past 50 years, and 123 blacks were killed nationwide by police using guns in 2012, whereas 326 whites were killed by police using guns that year, according to the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice.

In Baltimore's case, the mayor, the majority of the city council and half the police force are African American.

However, the perception of victimization by police is palpable in many African American communities nationwide, and experts said certain policies re-enforce this perception.

“It is a point of view held by so many — whether (black rights group) NAACP officials, teachers, clergy, writers, talk-radio hosts, office-holders, or candidates for office,” Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute’s project on criminal justice, told Xinhua.

The “stop and frisk” policy, for example, gives police in some cities the right to stop any suspicious person on the street and pat them down, checking for weapons or illegal paraphernalia. Critics say such policies are not exercised in white, affluent suburbs, but rather take place mostly in lower-income African American neighborhoods.

Lynch said there has been more media attention on such issues since the riots in the U.S. city of Ferguson last summer, sparked when Michael Brown, a young black man, was killed by a police officer. The riots grabbed global attention and caused massive damage.

“The availability of video of such incidents is also a big part of it. In Ferguson, the initial protests were a case of simmering anger that had reached the boiling point,” he said. However, he said this week’s riots in Baltimore were not protesters rioting, rather they were a case of opportunistic criminal mischief.

Americans view the recent rioting in Baltimore as criminal behavior, not legitimate protest, and think it will only worsen the criminal justice situation in the city.

In a Rasmussen report released Thursday, just 25 percent of American adults consider the mob violence in Baltimore to be primarily legitimate outrage. Sixty-three percent instead characterize it as mostly criminals taking advantage of the situation.

Meanwhile, critics point to a rising trend whereby police forces are being given more power, becoming more brazen, have less accountability to the communities they are supposed to protect, and are now carrying military-gear and wearing flak vests and helmets, like soldiers. Some experts said that puts police in a state of mind whereby they are soldiers and civilians are hostile enemies.

Lynch said the militarization of police tactics is a dangerous trend in American police departments — it too often brings about unnecessary confrontations and violence. However, that was not in play in the Freddie Gray case. Apart from the military equipment and mindset, there is too often a culture where misconduct is ignored.

“The resentment in minority communities festers as they wait for the good cops to take action against bad cops. When no action is taken, resentment grows and relations with the entire department sour,” he said.

In a surprise move expected to calm down the situation, State’s Attorney in Baltimore Marilyn Mosby declared Friday that six officers involved in the arrest of Gray were charged with

multiple counts including second-degree murder, involuntary manslaughter, assault and misconduct in office.