

## Could This be a Sign of Change in Police Shooting Crisis? by Roxanne Jones (March 30, 2018)

*Roxanne Jones, a founding editor of ESPN Magazine and former vice president at ESPN, has worked as a producer, reporter and editor at the New York Daily News and The Philadelphia Inquirer. Jones is co-author of "Say it Loud: An Illustrated History of the Black Athlete." She talks politics, sports and culture weekly on Philadelphia's Praise 107.9FM. The views expressed here are solely hers.*

(CNN)Millions of women and children have marched on Washington demanding #EqualityNow, #EqualPay, and #GunReformNow. The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have made it to the Oscars and set off a tidal wave that is taking down sexual predators and helping to change workplace cultures, from Hollywood to news media and Capitol Hill. And daily, the latest details of each Trump tweet, tawdry presidential tales from Stormy Daniels and the Russia investigations in Washington lead the news. Meanwhile, in communities across the country, police are still killing unarmed black people. Police are still killing and brutalizing black and brown children, women and men -- and getting away with it.

Watching yet another grieving grandmother like Sequita Thompson bury her 22-year-old grandchild Stephon Clark Thursday after he was shot (eight times, six of those shots in the back, according to an independent autopsy released by the family) and killed by police in her backyard in Sacramento, many are asking what can be done to stop these police killings across the nation. One answer can be found in Philadelphia, where a newly-elected district attorney, Larry Krasner, is making sweeping reforms and exposing and indicting rogue cops.

Krasner, who was elected by overwhelmingly black and Latino voters and heavily supported by #BlackLivesMatter movement activists, has been committed to the revolutionary justice reforms he promised during his progressive campaign. And voters are keeping him accountable. Since taking office in



January, Krasner has fired 31 prosecutors who he said not did not fit his law-reform agenda. He has also publicly released the names of 29 current and former police officers whose misconduct was so flagrant -- excessive force, racial bias, burglary and filing false reports -- that prosecutors did not want to use them as witnesses, according to philly.com. Krasner was responding to a court order to publicly release the officers' names, something the previous DA had refused to do.

Krasner's most groundbreaking work to date is his five-page list of policy changes for the prosecutor's office. It calls the new policies "an effort to end mass incarceration and bring balance back to sentencing." Measures include ending all prosecutions of marijuana possession regardless of weight, and scrapping marijuana paraphernalia crimes. It calls for an end to charges for sex crime workers with fewer than three offenses, rehab programs for those with more than three. The document restructures how plea deals are made, advising prosecutors to begin deals offering the lesser prison sentence, not the highest as had been done in the past. But the most radical change now directs prosecutors to "explain and justify" on the record the taxpayer costs to put each person they sentence in prison. According to the document, it costs between \$42,000 and \$60,000 a year to put a person in prison. A two-year sentence would, at a minimum, cost taxpayers \$84,000. And Krasner points out how these costs compare to the salaries of average teachers, firefighters and other citizens.

Krasner's just getting started, and we've yet to see the results of his reforms. But what's happening in Philadelphia is progress toward more equal justice for black and brown citizens, at a time when it is desperately needed. More than 72 black and Hispanic people have been killed by police to date in 2018, according to the Washington Post. That number reached 402 in 2017. Not all police killings are unjustified, but black Americans are killed at a much higher rate than whites. Yet there are few federal investigations. Rarely do any prosecutors call

for these officers to be charged and most never get prison time. These cases have become routine, accepted as a cruel type of justice for black and brown Americans.

The justifications for these shootings always sound the same, like in the recent decision by Louisiana Attorney General Jeff Landry not to file charges against the two white Baton Rouge police officers who shot and killed Alton Sterling, a 37-year-old black man. Cellphone video shows Sterling pinned to the ground moments before he was shot six times outside a convenience store. Police said he was reaching for a gun.

On Friday evening, after the Baton Rouge Police Department held disciplinary hearings to determine if the two officers followed departmental rules, Officer Blane Salamoni was fired for violating use-of-force policies against Sterling. Officer Howie Lake II will be suspended for three days for "losing his temper." The family, as many families have been begun to do in these police killings, has filed a civil lawsuit as a way to seek recourse outside of the criminal courts.

In Sacramento, Stephon Clark's story is similar: Clark was shot in his grandmother's backyard after he raised his hands, as police ordered. Police said Clark had a gun. Turns out Clark was holding a cell phone. Sound familiar? Protests in response to Clark's death continue, but they won't bring him back.

Will it ever end? With each of these police shootings, the racial divide in our nation grows deeper. Mistrust and anger grow. And the hypocrisy of our justice system is exposed. Everyone is at risk when the government fails its citizens.

Yet I see slim rays of hope, like Philadelphia, that equal justice will one day be more than a far-fetched idea. It was uplifting to see thousands of young people at the #MarchForOurLives call for gun control reforms in the wake of continuous mass school shootings. They have made their targets known: the NRA and the politicians it supports. The students have a list of demands, which include sensible gun control laws to keep classrooms

safe. We know the fight won't be easy, but the goal is clear. The NRA is powerful, yes. But it is a public organization. We can track its leaders, track the money it uses to influence elections and draft gun-favorable legislation. We can challenge politicians who accept their campaign donations. We can vote them out of office if we don't like their agendas. The lines are not so clear when it's police who are doing the killing and maiming, fully protected by a justice system that rarely rules these acts illegal. What happens when it's the police -- your own government -- that you live in fear of every day, not some hyped-up gunman with an assault rifle? That's the reality for black and brown children and adults.

And we know that President Trump's agenda does not include addressing issues of police brutality and injustice in the black and Latino communities. The White House calls these police killings a "local matter." District Attorney Krasner, like so many other Americans, understands that we must fix our broken, biased justice system. And he knows rogue officers should be held accountable. It's clear those reforms won't come from Washington. But I still believe we can make a difference one city at a time, one voice at a time, one vote at a time.

