

“Police are still killing black people. Why isn’t it news anymore?” by Wesley Lowery (March 16, 2018-*The Washington Post*)

Wesley Lowery is a national correspondent covering law enforcement, justice and their intersection with politics and policy for The Washington Post. He previously covered Congress and national politics. In 2015, he was a lead reporter on the "Fatal Force" project awarded the Pulitzer Prize and George Polk award.

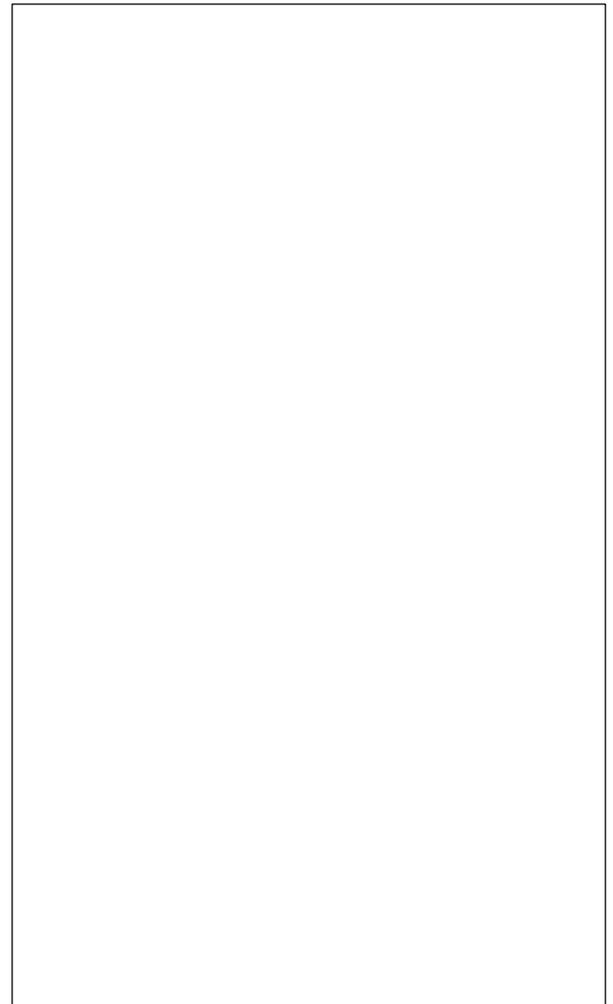


Protestors gather last year near the spot where Philando Castile was fatally shot by a police officer in Minnesota. (Jahi Chikwendiu/The Washington Post)

As the video begins, Edward Minguela, 32, is standing on the sidewalk. His hands are in the air. Three Camden County, N.J., police officers approach from all sides with their weapons drawn. They’d received an anonymous tip about a man with a gun. Minguela, who seemed to fit the description, is unarmed. The first officer to reach Minguela grabs him from behind and slams him to the ground. The officer then curls a fist and starts punching — landing a dozen rapid blows to Minguela’s head as two other officers help pin the man to the ground. A surveillance camera mounted to a nearby liquor store captured the Feb. 22 beating frame by frame, the latest addition to a familiar genre stretching from Rodney King to Alton Sterling. Unlike those other videos, you probably haven’t seen this one.

Police violence — beatings, Taserings, killings — and criminal justice reform more broadly were arguably the leading domestic news storyline during the final two years of the Obama administration. The deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Sandra Bland, Philando Castile and others dominated headlines, inspired nationwide protests and brought on a pro-law-enforcement backlash that helped elect President Trump. Now the issue has all but vanished from the national political conversation.

It’s not because police violence has stopped. As of Thursday, 212 people had been shot and killed by American police officers so far this year, according to The Washington Post’s police shooting



database — about the same pace of three fatal shootings per day that The Post has recorded since we began tracking police shootings in 2015. And it's not because reporters have abandoned police accountability: recent months have seen intensive investigations from *BuzzFeed*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *Tampa Bay Times* and the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, among others. Several Post reporters, myself included, spent 2017 investigating what happens to “bad apple” police officers after they are fired. As it turns out, they often end up right back on the job.

The first of several reasons policing reform has lost our national attention is obvious: Trump. The election of a reality television host under a cloud of Russian interference — whose White House is plagued by scandals, constant turnover, policy reversals, leaks and staff infighting — is deservedly the drama at center stage. Cable news stations, the political press corps and social media networks have covered Trump above all else. As a result, they no longer play the same role in amplifying the cause of police reform. A video like Minguela's, or the one showing the similar beating of Johnnie Jermaine Rush in Asheville, N.C. — which just 18 months ago would have spurred columns, debates, cable news panels and sustained protests — is no longer breaking through. “The nation has a short attention span, and frankly, is interested in what the major networks tell the nation it should be interested in,” Devon Jacob, the civil rights attorney representing Minguela, told me in an email.

This shift comes as many of the young activists who gained prominence after the Ferguson, Mo., protests have changed their tactics. While some of them initially disavowed the formal democratic process, many during the past two years have begun efforts focused on bending the political system from within. St. Louis activist Kayla Reed and political strategist Jessica Byrd helped launch the Electoral Justice Project, which has held town halls and voter registration efforts in dozens of cities. Writer and activist Shaun King last month started a political action committee aimed at electing progressive, smart-on-crime prosecutors, sheriffs and judges.

Others have found a home inside the broader framework of the Resistance. The team behind the police-reform-oriented Campaign Zero has launched the Resistance Manual and the Our States projects, both aimed at empowering their supporters to undercut the Trump agenda locally. Black Lives Matter co-founder Alicia Garza recently announced the Black Census project, which aims to survey 200,000 African Americans so organizers can better mobilize black votes around issues considered most urgent by black communities.

This evolution is a common phenomenon for activism born out of national tragedies and traumas: Some participants return to their lives and their jobs. Some tire of being in front of the cameras. And some adapt along with the news cycle. That was the model through which mothers and fathers of those killed at Sandy Hook reappeared to discuss the mass shootings in Orlando and Las Vegas, and the foot soldiers of 2014's #YesAllMen movement eventually helped power 2017's #MeToo movement. Dozens of community organizers and activist groups are doing the same police reform work they did before the masses in the streets drew the eyes of the nation to Ferguson, but once again, their work often isn't enough to seize our attention.

What's more, unlike President Barack Obama, Trump isn't interested in police reform. The Obama administration oversaw a significant reduction in federal incarceration, scaled back federal drug prosecutions and went further than any other modern White House in its efforts to reform local police departments. Trump, by contrast, has encouraged officers to rough up "thugs" they take into custody, telling an audience of officers last year, "Don't be too nice." His attorney general has openly heaped scorn on the legitimacy of his predecessors' investigations into local police forces, ordering a review of each of those probes and declining to open new ones. And unlike Obama, who was immediately and persistently asked to weigh in on issues of race and policing — from Henry Louis Gates's arrest to Trayvon Martin's death to the Ferguson protests — Trump faced no such questioning when police in Texas shot and killed 15-year-old Jordan Edwards last April or when a video of an Arizona officer fatally shooting unarmed Daniel Shaver was released last year.

Among other complicating factors is that, while police shootings have continued, the number of unarmed people being killed has dipped and therefore so has the number of videos of such shootings that galvanize the public. In 2015, 36 unarmed black men were fatally shot by police; footage of the armed yet compliant Castile, 12-year-old Tamir Rice and Walter Scott dying from their wounds prompted massive protests. In 2017, the figure was 19. Of the 33 black people fatally shot by police so far in 2018, only two incidents are known to have been caught on a body camera. Some policing experts say officers have become more cautious.

What have people who ostensibly care about police reform missed since the advent of Trump? In Baltimore — where the community outrage after the 2015 death of Freddie Gray and the subsequent Justice Department report documenting routine civil rights violations by the police force prompted wall-to-wall coverage — a police corruption trial that resulted in the conviction of two detectives surfaced evidence that the city's elite gun task force

routinely stole money and drugs from residents. The police commissioner called the revelations “some of the most egregious and despicable acts ever perpetrated in law enforcement.” In Philadelphia, a civil rights lawyer was elected district attorney and has begun implementing reforms that wow activists and infuriate the local police union. In Chicago, former police superintendent Garry McCarthy — who is at times hailed as a reformer, but who also oversaw the city’s botched handling of the Laquan McDonald shooting — is flirting with the idea of running against Rahm Emanuel, the mayor who hired and then fired him.

And then there’s Camden, where prosecutors say they are investigating the officer who beat Minguela. Meanwhile, Minguela himself still faces charges of resisting arrest and obstructing justice. In a world where the video of his beating got meaningful cable news play, or where more national reporters called the prosecutors for comment, would those charges still be on the books?

It can be hard, understandably, to focus on things that feel like they aren’t happening. And we don’t lack for alternate storylines: hurricanes that wrecked Houston and Puerto Rico, homicidal white supremacists in Charlottesville, and a massacre in Las Vegas that ranks as the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history. Still, if we collectively care about an issue only when the streets are literally burning, it’s reasonable to wonder if we actually care at all.