

Baltimore Protests: “Why So Much Anger?”: If You Don’t Know, Washington Post Won’t Tell You

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“Why is there so much anger?” If you were wondering that before you read the Washington Post’s [“primer,”](#) you’re probably still wondering. (photo: Algerina Perna/Baltimore Sun)

The Washington Post ([4/28/15](#)) offers: A Freddie Gray Primer: Who Was He, How Did He Die, Why Is There So Much Anger?

The “who was he” part comes from the [“no angel”](#) school of journalism—stressing his the “frequent run-ins with the law,” sniffing that he “lived off” compensation for childhood lead-poisoning. It’s not all negative—friends recall him as “loyal and warm, humorous and happy.” But as in other pieces in [this genre](#), there’s a sense that the point is not to humanize the victim but to allow readers to judge whether he deserved to live or die.

In this section, Post writers Peter Hermann and John Woodrow Cox describe Gray as “at the moment...the nation’s most prominent symbol of distrust in police.” Does he really symbolize “distrust in police”—or police violence against black men?

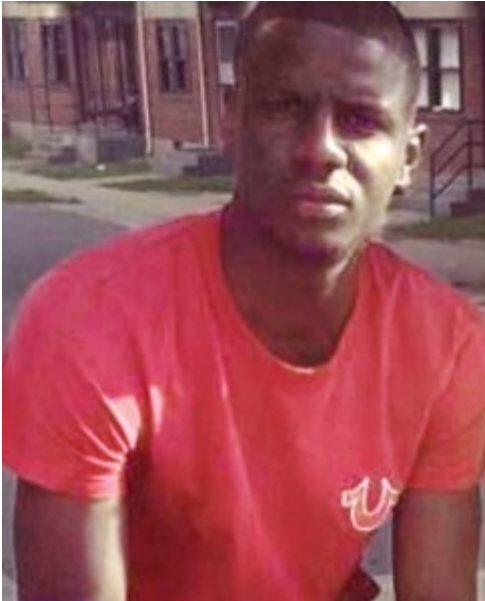
But the Post can’t refer to him as a symbol of police violence, because as far as the paper is concerned, there’s no way to tell whether any police violence occurred at all; in the next section—“How did he die?”—his death is presented as a complete mystery. Which is not surprising when you look at the [sourcing](#) for this section:

The officers said.... Officials say.... police officials said.... Officials said....
Baltimore police have acknowledged.... Police have said.... Those involved in
the arrest.... City officials have promised.... Baltimore Mayor Stephanie
Rawlings-Blake said....

This is a good example of what Adam Johnson [calls](#) “a friendly local media whose default position is to simply repeat ‘official’ accounts, no matter how illogical they may be.” The only independent source of information offered on Gray’s death comes from “video shot by a civilian bystander,” which “shows officers dragging Gray, who appeared limp, after he was handcuffed.” But the Post follows this up with “officials say he was able to climb into the back of a police van.”

You can see the video [here](#). When you can watch a person being dragged into the back of a police van, apparently unable to walk, and you know that he later died of spinal cord injuries, is it reasonable to suggest, as the Post account does, that his death might be attributed to the fact he “was not seat-belted after being placed in a transport van”?

The Post offers that as one of the “significant errors” that are “acknowledged” by police—along with denial of medical attention and failure to call an ambulance—a phrasing that frames Gray’s death as a mistake and treats exculpatory claims by police as revealed fact. (You don’t “acknowledge” a deceptive claim.)



Freddie Gray: The Post doesn’t see his brutal death as sufficient to explain a community’s anger.

The final section is “Why is there so much anger?” The question implicitly plays down Gray’s importance as an individual—isn’t the fact that police killed someone in a particularly brutal fashion with no credible explanation reason enough for a community to be angry?—but the article does tie Gray’s death to “what activists say is a much larger national issue: police mistreatment of black men.” After listing some of the more infamous instances of black men or youths killed by police—[Michael Brown](#), [Tamir Rice](#), [Eric Garner](#), [Walter Scott](#)—the piece continues:

Those tensions were only heightened in West Baltimore, where relations between residents and police have long been strained.

First of all, a series of deaths are not “tensions”—they’re actual violence, with real lives lost. Nor is “strained” the appropriate word to use for relations between police and residents where police have repeatedly killed those residents.

An ACLU of Maryland [report](#) found 109 people killed in police encounters in the state in a five-year period from 2010-14. Sixty-nine percent of those killed were black. (Maryland is 29 percent black.) Forty-five were not armed in any way; 80 percent of these victims were black.

You get a good sense of the human lives—and the racism—behind these statistics in a Baltimore Sun article ([9/28/14](#)) about the city’s police brutality settlements, summarized by Conor Friedersdorf in the Atlantic ([4/22/15](#)).

But none of this information was included in a passage that purports to explain “why is

there so much anger”—though the section does find space to mention “violent rioters who set cars ablaze, looted businesses and injured more than a dozen officers.”

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