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Baltimore residents speak out against police killing

By our reporters
27 April 2015

Protests over the police killing of Freddie Gray in Baltimore, Maryland, came to a head on Saturday as more than 2,000 demonstrators marched from the neighborhood where Gray was beaten to the City Hall downtown.



Handmade sign at Saturday's rally in front of city hall

Baltimore police heavily monitored Saturday's demonstration with all officers required to work on the day of the demonstration. Police used multiple helicopters to follow the march, as well as setting up barricades to prevent residents from gathering outside the Western District police station, where previous protests took place.

While there have been more than 350 police killings in the US so far this year, the death of Freddie Gray stands out as one of the most horrendous. Within an hour of encountering the police the healthy 25-year-old was put into a coma, with three fractured cervical vertebrae in his neck. Gray died of his injuries last Sunday, one week after his brutal encounter with Baltimore police officers.



Yvette Barnett

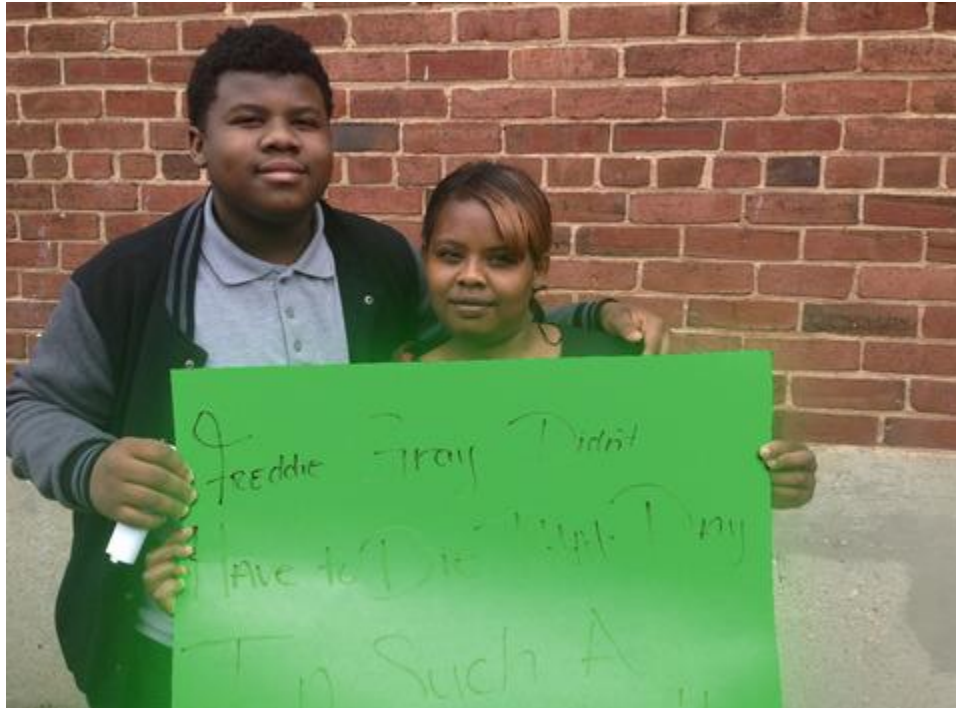
Yvette Barnett, a friend of Freddie Gray and witness to the incident, was among the demonstrators. Barnett gave her account of the event to the WWSW, stating, "We were walking together. There were a few other guys and Freddie. I was ready to turn off to go home, but when I saw the police bikes chasing Freddie, I came this way. He was running. They were chasing him because he made some kind of eye contact with the police. I'm still trying to figure out why they chased him because there was no reason.

"I guess they started beating him up in one of the alleys back there. I know they beat him up because the last time I saw him he was walking, and then less than 5 minutes later the police were dragging him. It was the same six policemen. I saw them drag him right here to where someone removed the memorial we set up. Then an officer kneed him in the back. The officer told me to move back, but I didn't. I asked 'What did you do to him?'

"They just told me to move back or they would lock me up. I eventually moved back, and then Freddie just started screaming, 'Mama. Help me Mama.'

"They threw him in the cage in the back of the police van, and he was still screaming. To hear someone scream in so much pain, [those cops] need to go to jail. They need to get the same punishment I or any other citizen would get. I don't know Freddie's family, but my deepest sympathies go out to them. I miss him already."

Other residents, many of whom had seen the videos of Gray—unable to walk—being thrown into the police van, also expressed their outrage over Gray’s death and the wave of police murders.



Vernon and Latoya

Latoya Walker, a teaching aid, said, “I came out here today because I am disturbed by what happened to Freddie. This is a problem in Baltimore and a lot of other cities, and someone needs to pay for their actions.

“Even if Freddie had a knife on him, like the police claim, he was not threatening the police or anyone else. There is no excuse for how they treated him, and no answer on why it took them so long to get to the police station.

“I see this kind of thing every day. Two days before Freddie Gray died I saw a man being harassed by the police. When you go out you have to be scared of the law because you don’t know how it will come after you.”

Asked why politicians do not hold the police accountable, Walker responded, “They are all in it together. That is why people need to speak up for our rights. This is not a racial issue, the police can hurt you, or me, or my son.

Walker’s nephew Vernon, added, “The police and the politicians just stick together, and none of them care about us. These killings are not just a black thing either, the police are killing a lot of people of every race.”

Alonso Barrera, a recently unemployed worker, said, “I live in this area and what happened here was wrong. No matter what we say nothing seems to change, even the politicians who say they represent us don’t do anything for change.”

Barrera, who had been in New York City around the time Eric Garner was strangled by police, was unsure if anyone would be held accountable for the death of Freddie Gray; a sentiment expressed by many attending the rally.

“In my opinion, if people were given help things would be a lot better here,” Barrera stated. “Some people make bad decisions, like dealing drugs, but they only do that to try and get some money for themselves and their kids.”

Many protesters, also, related the death of Freddie Gray to the wave of police killings and incidents of brutality across the country.



Kevin

Kevin, a bartender and lifelong Baltimore resident, described how he was once beaten by police after telling officers not to abuse someone they were arresting. He said, “They did not press charges against me, but I had to spend the night in jail. At the time I had no idea how common this kind of thing was.”

Asked about why the police could get away with these actions, Kevin said, “They are a military force tasked with protecting the status quo. The police are at the behest of whoever argues the laws better, which is always those who have the most amount of money.

“Both the Democrats and Republicans are the same, but try to talk to different sections of the population. The Republicans speak to the very rich, while the Democrats try to tell the rest of us about safe streets and neoliberal policies. A lot of people don’t remember that [President Bill]

Clinton was part of three strikes policy [of giving repeat offenders of minor crimes lengthy prison terms] and that hurt a lot of people.

“All this talk about keeping people safe is really about targeting African-Americans, or more specifically non-wealthy African-Americans. They want to set up a caste system, to keep people from getting the life everyone deserves.

“They want to keep people divided. If you look at the protest here you can see people of all different races coming together. This is exactly what they don’t want.”

Tom Smith, a student majoring in construction, said, “I’m here to support my city, and because I am tired of this violence.

“The police are tasked with looking into cases of police brutality, and they don’t want to go after their own kind. The government is basically telling them that police brutality is legal, and if they were punished I’m sure these incidents would stop.”

Smith also felt that it was unnecessary for the police to be given so much money for new equipment, and that crime would go down if money was used to help the community. He said this was not done because nobody “sees a profit in helping us out.”