

Federal agents sent to Baltimore to bolster local police

Tom Hall
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Baltimore city officials announced last week that federal agents will embed with the local police department. Ten agents from five agencies, including the FBI, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms, and Explosives (ATF), the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA), the US Marshals Service and the Secret Service, will join with members of the Baltimore Police Department's (BPD) homicide section for the next 60 days.

Together with 20 agents from the ATF already in Baltimore, they will form the newly created B-FED Task Force, whose mission, according to BPD, will be to develop "creative approaches to building cases" against murder suspects. "If we can't bring state charges against a particular suspect for whatever reason, then there may be an opportunity to look at what that criminal is doing otherwise in his life that would warrant a federal charge," interim police commissioner Kevin Davis told a press conference on Monday in front of BPD Headquarters.

The move is unusual because it is the reverse of normal collaboration between federal and local police, in which the latter cooperate with federal investigations carried out by the former. A press release by BPD headquarters expressed its hope that "this unique approach to homicide investigations will become a permanent fixture of local law enforcement."

The official justification for the program is the surge in homicides since the military-style repression of the Freddie Gray protests in April. Since the state of the year at least 197 people have been killed in Baltimore, which has a population of 622,000, resulting in the second-highest murder rate in the country behind St. Louis. In reality, the program, which the BPD itself anticipates will become a model for police work more generally, is a trial program whose aim is to augment

the repressive powers of local police in anticipation of further, inevitable social unrest.

The spike in the murder rate, Davis admitted the day before, is not unique to Baltimore, as cities such as St. Louis, New Orleans and Chicago have also seen a rash of murders in recent months. However, a reported factor in the surge in Baltimore's murder rate since April is an arrest slowdown by Baltimore police, in retaliation against what they perceived as an insufficiently aggressive crackdown by City Hall on the largely peaceful Freddie Gray demonstrations. Police arrested only 1,177 in May, the first full month after the protests, a 43 percent drop from April and less than a third of the number of arrests the previous May. With 42 people killed, this was the single deadliest month since 1971, until it was surpassed in July, when 45 people were killed.

A similar work slowdown was carried out in January by New York City police officers, angered by what they considered to be insufficient support from Mayor Bill de Blasio in response to a spate of police killings. This strategy backfired, however, when crime actually fell during the slowdown.

Kevin Davis replaced Anthony Batts as police commissioner in July, when he was suddenly fired by Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake as a concession to the local Fraternal Order of Police. The decision came hours after the FOP released a politically motivated report on the police response to the Freddie Gray protests that attacked Batts for allegedly ordering riot police to avoid attacking protesters. Among their laundry list of complaints was that he had not sanctioned the arrests of journalists covering the protests.

Despite the semi-insurrectionary mood within the police department, the entire political establishment,

from the local government to the Obama administration, fully backed the military-style repression of protesters, which followed by eight months the military occupation of Ferguson, Missouri in response to the Michael Brown protests.

Obama took to national television during the protests to slander the protesting youth as “thugs,” and the Department of Justice worked closely with local police, bringing in at least two spy planes to help coordinate the crackdown. Governor Lawrence Hogan declared a state of emergency in response to the protests, and the Maryland National Guard was called in to occupy the city. Rawlings-Blake herself organized the crackdown from the start, and continued to hail the police department’s “courageous” behavior during the protests, even while facing a virtual rebellion by police officers.

The slowdown itself has played into the hands of the local political establishment, who have joined hands with the media to whip up a law-and-order hysteria aimed at blaming the crime wave on the Freddie Gray protests and the population itself. Davis, for example, has made the absurd claim that prescription drugs allegedly stolen during the April 27 protests have helped to contribute to the murder rate.

Local media have breathlessly reported claims by police officers that the slowdown is due to their fear of the “dangerous hostility” of the population. “The criminals are taking advantage of the situation in Baltimore since the unrest,” an FOP official told the local CBS affiliate. “[Police] are more afraid of going to jail for doing their jobs properly than they are of getting shot on duty.”

Crime “experts” have taken to the newspapers to make the claim, unsubstantiated by any data, that the rise in the murder rate is directly attributable to mass hostility towards the police in the aftermath of protests against police violence, the so-called “Ferguson effect.” “The most plausible explanation of the current surge in lawlessness is the intense agitation against US police departments over the past nine months,” Heather MacDonald, a fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute, wrote in an editorial in the *Wall Street Journal*.

At Monday’s press conference, Elijah Cummings, a black congressman representing the city of Baltimore, attempted to paint the largely black working class

population of Baltimore as criminals, declaring, “Black lives matter and they do matter. But black lives also have to matter to black people. We know over and over again a lot of the victims of these crimes are African-American, and we know a lot of the perpetrators are African-American.”

Baltimore police, as with their counterparts nationwide, view the entire population as a hostile force. In July, Davis announced the creation of a provocatively named “War Room” within police headquarters, staffed by representatives from local and federal police and prosecutors, to coordinate violent crime investigations.

This mentality is not isolated to local police. The FBI, which is sending two agents to work in B-FED per last week’s announcement, was discovered in March to have infiltrated police brutality protests in Minneapolis, in close collaboration with local law enforcement. The US Department of Homeland Security has also regularly monitored Black Lives Matter protesters over social media, according to a recent report by the *Intercept*.



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