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[The best way to curb police abuse](#)

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Right now, Newark is at a crossroads. Mayor Cory Booker recently announced plans to restructure police leadership, creating an opportunity to demonstrate his professed commitment to police accountability and best practices. More than any other position, Newark needs a permanent independent monitor to work for the best interests of officers and citizens alike.

This afternoon hundreds of people will march through Newark to commemorate International Day Against Police Brutality and call attention to this very need for strong police oversight. While "police brutality" conjures images of violent assaults, even police abuse that leaves no physical marks has a devastating impact.

Two Newark students who will join the march -- a 13-year-old and a 15-year-old -- learned firsthand this summer about what can happen if police powers go unchecked. After a packed day of practice with their Pop Warner football team, an all-star high school football game and a session at their coach's home to look at game film, the boys' assistant coach took them out for a burger.

In recounting what happened, they said at least two unmarked police cars suddenly blocked the coach's car. About half a dozen officers jumped out and surrounded them, guns drawn. They pulled all three out of the car, roughly searched them and put guns to their bodies.

The police illegally searched the car and found only football gear. When the coach asked the reason for the search, an officer responded, "I don't know who schooled you on your rights, but you have no (bleeping) rights." He asked again and was told, "Because we do whatever we (bleeping) want. We have no rules."

The coach received two tickets that night -- one for failure to wear a seat belt and one for not changing his Missouri driver's license to a New Jersey license, even though by law he still had time to change it.

The teens' families filed an internal affairs complaint but got the runaround. When one mother called to check on it, an officer explained that it had been transferred to the gang unit because it involved three African-American men. By the time the ACLU offered its help, the complaint was misplaced and unaccounted for.

The incident left all three shaken up and scared. To this day, they remain nervous about going out at night and fear the police. The coach no longer feels comfortable taking team members out on his own. Instead of seeing the Newark police as a presence there to protect them, the three now see the police as a potential threat to be protected from. A city with Newark's crime rates can't afford to have law-abiding citizens afraid of the police.

All three say that what they want most is confidence that it won't happen to anyone else.

The ACLU has discussed the incident with Newark officials, who have responded with concern and agreed to take steps to make the internal affairs operations more accessible and accountable. Currently, neither the recently revamped city website nor the Newark police website provides information about how to file complaints with internal affairs, and the precincts aren't much better. The city has promised to do more to let the public know how to pursue a complaint and says it will establish integrity control officers to handle complaints at every command post. Much work is also needed to improve the accounting of internal affairs complaints; the annual statistics simply don't add up.

Such improvements to internal affairs are important and overdue, but establishing an independent monitor position is the best way to curb abuse of power and misconduct. An independent monitor, armed with subpoena power and expertise in police practices, would assess the work of the Newark Police Department and recommend ways to improve policies, practices and department culture. An independent monitor would ensure that the internal affairs process is fair, thorough, timely and consistent.

In other major police departments -- Denver, San Jose, Boise and Portland -- independent monitors have turned poor departments around and transformed good departments into great ones. The New Jersey State Police has improved dramatically with the benefit of a monitor. And, as the State Police can attest, an independent monitor's influence can bring technologies and resources that police officers need to do their jobs well.

Independent monitors also help departments identify and remove the bad apples that spoil the reputation of the majority of officers who perform their difficult jobs with integrity.

Booker has the power to show those two teenagers and their coach that by coming forward about their trauma, they served as a catalyst for changes that will prevent the same thing from happening to others. If the mayor is earnest about having an exemplary police department, making change and being held accountable, what we need is an independent monitor whose subpoena power will guarantee strong oversight.

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