What justice for Laquan McDonald could look like

# It took public pressure to convict Jason Van Dyke. It will take more pressure to reform the police.

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Chicagoans march on October 5, 2018, after police officer Jason Van Dyke was convicted of killing Laquan McDonald. Photo by Michael Rabbitt.

“Justice for Laquan!” chanted demonstrators gathered on the Chicago street underneath the *Christian Century*’s offices. Their shouts were primarily ones of affirmation: a jury had just delivered a version of justice for Laquan McDonald by convicting a white police officer of second-degree murder for shooting the black teenager in 2014. The verdict was based heavily on a dashboard camera video showing McDonald walking away from the officer before he was shot 16 times.

The ruling has raised hopes in Chicago and beyond that police will finally be held accountable for misconduct. Nationwide, it’s rare for any jury to convict police officers, and until the recent verdict, no Chicago police officer had been convicted of murder in an on-duty shooting in nearly 50 years. The ruling also raised hopes that a

genuine reform of police behavior might begin that would establish the trust of citizens, a trust almost entirely broken in the black community.

For over a year after McDonald's murder, the city had refused to release the dashboard video. Widespread complaints of cover-up eventually led to the resignation of the police chief and the indictment of three police officers on charges of obstructing an internal investigation. A federal probe of the police department confirmed black citizens' long-standing complaints about racist practices and the excessive use of force.

The new chief has embraced a reform agenda, calling for more training of police in de-escalation tactics, a stricter review of police conduct, and a greater focus on building relationships in the community. But Chicago police have a long history of reform efforts that end up doing little to alter police behavior. Hope that this time will be different rests largely on a court-ordered agreement between the city and the Illinois attorney general that covers police training, discipline, and the use of force. Police adherence to the agreement will be monitored by a federal judge.

The everyday task of restoring trust on the street remains enormous. A 2016 poll found that only 20 percent of Chicago voters think police treat all citizens fairly, and only 6 percent of African Americans think so. Suspicions that a "code of silence" prevents police officers from addressing their own misconduct is widespread: nearly two-thirds of citizens think it's a problem. Adding to that suspicion is the negative response of police unions to the McDonald verdict. One union leader referred to a "sham trial and shameful verdict" which, he said, sent a message to police "that it's not the perpetrator in front of you that you need to worry about, it's the political operatives stabbing you in the back."

But the demonstrators who took to the streets were not vengeful political operatives. They were citizens who want a police department that serves all communities fairly. They were citizens keenly aware that it took public pressure to gain the release of the dashboard video—and with it a measure of justice. Their presence in the street was a call to politicians, religious leaders, and other citizens to keep the pressure on.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "In Chicago, a moment of accountability for police."*