

Black Lives Matter: A Foundational Debate in America

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Content Warning: This essay contains mentions of assault, racism, and murder.

Black people in the United States of America are most likely to be killed by police 3 times the rate of white people and are 1.3 times more likely to be unarmed when killed. 8 of the 100 largest city police departments kill at higher rates than the median US murder rate; per every 100k people in Reno, Nevada, statistically, 12.1 black men will be killed by police, versus the US average of 5. 98.3% of these killings do not result in charges for the officers (Sinyangwe). While this statistic may include legitimately justified killings, a great percentage of unjustified murders occur without consequence. The lack of justice for the Black community has created a long-awaited uproar in the streets of America, and one that has gained international attention and support.

Down to its roots, the United States of America has a huge race problem. Christopher Columbus, the well-known explorer credited with discovering the land, enslaved the indigenous people he came upon in the Caribbean Islands and along the Central and South American coasts, treating them with extreme violence and brutality. He forced these enslaved people to work for the sake of his own personal profit, sending thousands of Taíno people from their islands to Spain, where many were sold into slavery, or forced to work in gold mines and on plantations (Lee). Upon arriving in Plymouth, Massachusetts, Columbus wrote in his journal that the Indigenous people “should be good servants” and “can be subjugated and made to do what is required of them,” despite reporting how “artless” and “generous” they were (Wright). He

cultivated a culture where white supremacy ruled the land: one that still is present over five hundred years later.

From 1954 to 1968, the Civil Rights Movement in America put a spotlight on the struggle to end institutionalized racial discrimination, codified disenfranchisement, and legal racial segregation. Led by activists like Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, John Lewis, Malcolm X, and Jesse Jackson, the movement fought for federal policy reform that would ensure equal treatment of racial minorities in the eyes of the law and was—arguably—successful in doing so. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, Voting Rights Act of 1965, and Fair Housing Act of 1968 were signed into legislation by the president at the time, Lyndon Johnson, with the goal of ending segregation, Black voter suppression, and discriminatory employment and housing practices (Janken). Unfortunately, these efforts only paved the way for different forms of systemic racism to emerge in American society.

Backstopped by notions such as the one made by Doctor Edward Huntington Williams, who stated that police “...needed higher caliber guns to kill Black men because cocaine made them impervious to normal-sized bullets” in 1914, drugs and the War on Drugs has provided a shield for law enforcement to use in order to disproportionately arrest, prosecute, and kill Black people (Cooper). Implemented largely by President Richard Nixon in 1971, over time the War on Drugs has since been exposed to be a scheme to imprison black people and hippies, as they were the “two enemies” of the time period (that included the Vietnam War and aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement). Former Nixon domestic policy chief John Ehrlichman said that “We [the Nixon administration] couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin [,] and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt those communities” (LoBianco). Ehrlichman continued to detail how the administration carried out this self-described disruption of these communities, saying “we could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news,” admitting that “of course” the administration knew their claims were lies (LoBianco).

These justifications have far from disappeared in the present day. The “high on drugs” and “drug fiend” defense in court has continued to allow police officers to go free after unlawfully killing someone, most notably seen in the case of Rodney King—who was beaten by up to fifteen police officers with batons after a high-speed car chase, sparking the 1992 Los Angeles riots. One of the key lines of defense in court was that officers were afraid that he had “superhuman strength” from being high on PCP, despite King testing negative for the drug (Daly). Time and time again, this same defense has been utilized. In 2014, police officer Jason Van Dyke was filmed shooting teenager Laquan McDonald sixteen times, claiming he thought the 17-year-old was a “violent drug user” and had “superhuman powers” due to his alleged PCP use. Officer Betty Shelby was acquitted of first-degree manslaughter after shooting unarmed Terence Crutcher, who had his hands in the air, motivated by the suspicion of PCP use, but was only later found in his system. Cannabis, which is now legally available in many states across the US, led to the death of Philando Castile, who was shot to death in front of his girlfriend and their daughter in their car after officer Jeronimo Yanez said the smell of marijuana made him “fear for his life” (Daly). The drug defense was even used in the case of George Floyd, where the attorney for one of the four officers charged for Floyd’s death argued that Floyd was an ex-convict whose cause of death was an overdose of Fentanyl, not asphyxiation inflicted by the Minneapolis police officers.

The ‘Black Lives Matter’ movement has been in existence officially since 2013, created following the acquittal of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, who shot and killed the teen as a neighborhood watch on the grounds of self-defense, although Trayvon lived in the area and was walking home from the corner store (Channel 4 News). It was further advanced by the murder of Eric Garner in 2014, who died at the hands of New York City police officers using an illegal chokehold after being accused of illegally selling cigarettes on the street corner; eleven times he cried “I Can’t Breathe,” lines that were unheard by the officers but infamously rang around the world after his death (Lowery). The Black Lives Matter movement is self-described¹ as an “ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are

¹ It is important to note that the Black Lives Matter movement does not associate with a singular central organization or leader, and cannot be accurately represented by only one mission statement or organization (Barrón-López; Ball). However, we include the most common and accepted definition here.

systematically and intentionally targeted for demise” and seeks to affirm Black people’s humanity, contributions to society, and resilience in the face of deadly oppression (Garza, Cullors & Tometi).

Recent events have revitalized the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, even in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man going on a run in his South Georgia neighborhood on one Sunday afternoon who was chased down by a white man and his son and shot twice, on February 23 shook the already unsteady American foundation to its core (Fausset). It has been continuously increased by numerous following deaths, most notably the murders of Breonna Taylor—shot five times in her own home by Louisville Police Officers carrying out a called-off house raid (Oppel, Taylor & Bogel-Burroughs)—and of George Floyd—suffocated to death by police officer Derek Chauvin as he knelt on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds over a suspected counterfeit \$20 bill (Hill et al.). Protests erupted not only in the United States of America but around the world, demanding justice for Arbery, Taylor, and Floyd, as well as the countless other Black lives unlawfully ended at the hands of law enforcement.

Children are also falling victim to the unjustified actions of American police officers. Tamir Rice, only 12 years old, was shot within seconds of police arrival to the scene, on suspicion that he had a gun. After his death, it was found to be a toy. Seven-year-old Aiyana Jones was sleeping on the couch with her grandmother, when a flashbang (commonly used to disorient inhabitants in “wartime raids”) was thrown through the window, setting her blanket on fire (Leduff). The Detroit SWAT team then entered her home. firing immediately upon entry, one bullet going through her neck, killing her (Leduff). In reality, they had raided the wrong house.

The Black Lives Matter movement wants one thing. Justice. Unfortunately, that is not what they are receiving. Between 2013-2019, 98.3% of killings by the police did not result in a criminal charge for the officers (Sinyangwe). This lack of accountability stems from the strength of protections police officers receive, including ‘qualified immunity’, union contracts, and close district attorney relationships, which all come together to create a culture that makes it very difficult to convict law enforcement on any sort of

crime. Therefore, the movement and its supporters have widely called for a mass restructuring of the police force as Americans know it. Specifically, they call for 'defunding the police,' a simplified term for the process of "reallocating or redirecting funding away from the police department or other government agencies funded by the local municipality" to health care, mental health services, addiction support, and education. Data shows that nine out of ten calls to emergency services are for nonviolent encounters, which put a spotlight on how out of touch law enforcement is to the training needed for these social interactions when they turn sour. In training, officers focus on use-of-force tactics and worst-case scenarios to reduce potential threats, even though a majority of interactions with civilians start with a simple conversation (Ray).

The most visible aspects of the Black Lives Matter movement have been nationwide, sustained mass protests. Chants of "No Justice, No Peace" are heard loud and clear at protests around the country, and truly encapsulates the purpose of the uprisings. However, rampant claims of the organization being full of "terrorists," "anarchists," and "thugs," popularized by American President Donald Trump, aim to downplay the protests as violent schemes to destroy small businesses and create unnecessary havoc (Ali). In late May, a 7:30 pm to 6 am curfew was imposed in Tampa by Mayor Jane Castor, following the damaging/burglary of more than 50 businesses and damage to more than 50 police cars after a peaceful protest grew violent after the sun went down. But those who participated in the violence were identified by Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister as those who "...were focused on chaos instead of change", and therefore were not associated with the Black Lives Matter protest itself (Shedden, Miller & Colombini). In fact, between May 26 and August 22, "more than 93 percent of all demonstrations connected to the movement, demonstrators did not engage in violence or destructive activity." Peaceful protests were held in over 2,400 distinct locations and violence occurred in less than 220 (Ali). It has been proven that the movement itself aims at enacting change through peaceful protests, and those who stray away from this goal are not associated with it.

All in all, the mass peaceful protests as part of the Black Lives Matter movement reveal the unhappiness and dissatisfaction among a large proportion of Americans in

how they and their neighbors are treated by those who are supposed to keep them safe. Its media exposure opens the door to more educational opportunities and more voices to be heard, motivating citizens in every town to become educated on local and national issues and fight to change the American foundation that is covered in long-lasting traces of white supremacy.

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