

## **Black Lives Matter: Police Brutality in the Era of COVID-19**

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As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to shock the globe and disproportionately affect Black communities, an additional long-running U.S. epidemic has rapidly gained domestic and global awareness: disproportionate police brutality against the Black community. Being killed by the police is a leading cause of death for Black men in America.<sup>1</sup> Blacks are 3.5 times more likely than Whites to be killed by a police officer in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

Though police brutality and COVID-19 are separate tragedies, they intersect. As with police killings, the COVID-19 death rate is higher among Blacks than the U.S. population overall.<sup>3</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on America's deeply rooted structural health inequities. From inadequate access to healthcare to representing a disproportionate share of active frontline essential workers, the U.S. Black population consistently bears the burden of life-threatening consequences due to structural racism and non-inclusive policies throughout multiple institutions.

The recent killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, and Ahmaud Arbery - to name a few individuals - have resulted in widespread protests and support not only from the Black American community, but from allies across the globe. The historical upholding of white supremacist values in criminal justice policies, degradation of economic opportunity in the Black community, and Black political and economic marginalization have resulted in the senseless and preventable loss of countless Black lives. If citizens in all 50 states and numerous countries are protesting about the unnecessary killings of Black people by the American police, it is safe to assume that the current system is broken.

### **Educating non-Blacks**

We must ask ourselves serious questions: Why do darker people historically struggle the most? How do you, as an individual, contribute to or fail to prevent these struggles from occurring on a regular basis? Our general perceptions of the world derive not only from societal influence but from the perpetuation of these ideas in our everyday lives. A 2010 study commissioned by CNN and led by renowned child psychologist Margaret Beale Spencer examined children's racial beliefs and attitudes.<sup>4</sup> The study found that White children exhibit "white bias": the favoring of a White figure in positive scenarios. The data showed that White children were more stereotypic than Black children in their attitudes, preferences, and beliefs. Spencer concluded that even though all children are exposed to stereotypes, Black parents are presented with the additional challenge of having to help reframe societal racial narratives for their own children - a problem that White parents do not face (with the exception of biracial children).<sup>4</sup>

Even though racism is an ideology that is generally thought to be "socially unacceptable", open discussions about racism against the Black community are regularly discouraged by those who hold power in our society (e.g., media, sports, corporations, politicians).<sup>5</sup> Colorism (prejudice in favor of lighter skin color) is discussed even less. Due to the lack of discussion about the existence and negative impacts of colorism, the darkest people in various ethnicities and cultures are left to bear the brunt of oppression without the appropriate support nor validation.<sup>6</sup>

Asian and Latinx communities must also have honest conversations about the oppression of the darkest people within their own cultures and the ways in which their communities preserve and glorify White, Western standards. Officer Tou Thao, a Hmong American, is being described by anti-racist activists as a symbol of Asian American complicity in anti-black practices.<sup>7</sup> Officer Thao was seen in several images with his back turned while George Floyd was being suffocated to death by a White police officer.

There must also be acknowledgement about anti-Black racism within the Latinx community. A little-known fact of history is that Latin America received 95% of enslaved Africans (5% were brought to Northern America).<sup>8</sup> Those who hold economic, social, and political power in the majority of Latin American countries tend to be white and/or lighter skin.<sup>9</sup> White supremacy is so deeply engrained that many Latin American countries conducted practices to “lighten up” their Black and Indigenous populations throughout history (i.e. Trujillo regime in Dominican Republic and the infamous antihaitianismo policy).<sup>10</sup> This may be one explanation for why anti-blackness is still rampant within the Latino community. For example, Trayvon Martin’s killer, George Zimmerman, identifies as a white-Latino.<sup>11</sup>

To be sure, the Latinx community also faces significant racism and prejudice in the U.S. Indeed, Donald Trump launched his 2016 Presidential campaign by invoking common stereotypes about Mexicans as criminals and rapists. The point is not to discredit or devalue the Latinx experience with racism and inequity in the U.S, nor is it to polarize communities even further. Instead, the aim is to have honest conversations about the perceptions of Black people cross-culturally. By doing so, we can take one step closer to abolishing the real viruses in our society: colonialism and white supremacy.

### **Redefining Policing**

The modern institution of law enforcement in the United States is a relatively new concept. Prior to the “abolition” of American slavery, the institution of policing was either privately funded and employed part-time officers or was carried out by neighborhood actors/volunteers. However, “during Reconstruction, many local sheriffs functioned in a way [similar] to the earlier slave patrols, enforcing segregation and the disenfranchisement of freed slaves” (12). The Wickersham Commission in 1929 professionalized the institution of law enforcement, leading to the current state of modern policing.

Police violence against the Black community has multiple other health consequences besides death. In addition to the insensible and preventable Black death caused by police brutality, “living in minority communities with a high concentration of use of force by police against pedestrians is associated with an increased risk of diabetes and obesity.”<sup>13</sup> Police brutality is not only a calamity for the victim and those who knew them, but also presents itself as a public health issue to black and brown community members.<sup>13</sup>

Many activists and protestors are advocating for policies that would bring less power to the institution of law enforcement and more power to the people who currently live in over-policed communities. Proposals to defund the institution of law enforcement emphasize identifying ways the police are abusing certain resources, reducing their budgets, and reallocating funds back into the communities in which they patrol. This includes enhancing funding to strengthen institutions that can actually help to reduce crime in the long and short term (e.g., education, housing, mental health treatment).<sup>14</sup>

Going beyond these proposals, I suggest complete redefinition of the role of police in communities. Instead of having one standardized number to call for every emergency, there should be a ranking of the type of emergency, ranging from immediate/life-threatening to a civil dispute that could be handled without law enforcement. From Oakland’s Barbeque Becky disturbance<sup>15</sup> to New York City’s Amy

Cooper episode,<sup>16</sup> the disproportionate abuse of 911 by white Americans has drawn millions around the world to witness how America's "problem with the color line"<sup>16</sup> is still very much alive. I believe providing only one number to call for emergencies, in a country of over 300 million, is not appropriate for the racial climate in U.S. society.

## Staying Engaged

There is also much we can do as individuals. Donate to your local anti-racist community organizations. Find ways to get involved through online webinars (and eventually in-person events). Read through the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag posts on social media to learn about different Black lived experiences. Read Black literature, and support Black media, artists, businesses, and people. Be mindful of your interactions with your Black friends, coworkers, and neighbors. Do not be complacent during this time. Every voice matters.

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