

# What is Police Violence?

A plain language booklet  
about anti-Black racism, police  
violence, and what you  
can do to stop it



# Introduction

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We are writing this booklet in June of 2020. Right now, there are protests all over the country about racism and police violence. We wrote this booklet in plain language so as many people as possible can understand the protests.

There is a lot to know about racism and police violence. We can't talk about everything in this short booklet. We will tell you where to learn more. And, we will work on more resources. This booklet is just to get you started.

**Racism** is when people are treated unfairly because of their race.

**Anti-Black racism** is when Black people are treated unfairly because they are Black.

People can do racist things. For example:

Byron is Black. He wants to rent a house.

Tyler is white. He owns a house, and wants to rent it out.

Byron comes to see Tyler's house.

Tyler lies to Byron because Byron is Black.

Tyler tells Byron that the house is not up for rent.

Tyler only wants to rent his house to white people.

Tyler was being racist when he lied to Byron.

Society does racist things. For example:

There are many times where a Black person and a white person do the same crime.

Usually, the Black person will go to jail for longer.

The white person might not even go to jail!

The way our society deals with crime is racist.

It is set up to hurt Black people.

In the United States, racism is part of our government. It is part of our courts. Racism is built into the way the United States works. The United States is set up to be better for white people than for people of color. And, most of the people running the country are white. This means that our country has the power to treat people of color unfairly. They often do, and our country is especially unfair to Black people.

We can work to stop this. We can learn more about how our country is unfair. We can work to make it fair.

## Racism and the police

Racism is a big part of how the police work. This has been true since the United States started.

In the United States, police helped protect slavery. They didn't help protect Black people. They helped catch enslaved people who tried to escape.

After the Civil War, some states passed new laws that kept white people and Black people apart. These laws gave white people more power. These laws treated Black people unfairly. This was called **segregation**. The laws about segregation were called **Jim Crow laws**. The police enforced these laws. They hurt Black people.

Black people protested to end segregation. After decades of protesting, the laws changed. But racism did not change. States and the US government started making different, unfair laws to put more Black people in jail. They made the police much bigger.

Between [1992](#) and [2018](#), we got 250,000 more police in the U.S. And, they put [many more](#) Black people in jail. In 1980, there were 500,000 people in jail or prison in the U.S. In 2016, there were 2,200,000 people in jail or prison.

The police still put Black people in prison much more often than they put white people in prison. When Black people are in jail, they can be forced to work for free. Also, they can be stopped from voting.

So, the police have always been a big part of how the United States hurts Black people. This is still true today.

A lot of white people don't realize the police are dangerous because police have never hurt *them*. But police are very dangerous to Black people. Police hurt Black people all the time. They especially hurt Black people with disabilities.

Black people do not commit more crimes. But:

- More police patrol neighborhoods where lots of Black people live.
- Police arrest Black people more than they arrest other people.
- Police put Black people in jail more often than they put other people in jail.
- If a white person and a Black person do the same crime, police will often arrest the Black person and let the white person go.
- Police hurt and kill Black people more than other people. When police hurt and kill people, it is called **police violence**.

Racism isn't just about one person being unfair. It is also about society. When we talk about police, we are talking about society. We are not talking about any specific police officer. We are talking about police in general. The problem isn't just that some police are racist. The problem is that all police are a part of a racist system.

## Police violence

Police are not supposed to hurt or kill people for no reason. But they do. It happens all the time. In 2019, police killed [at least 1,000](#) people in the U.S.

We are writing this factsheet in June 2020. Here are some times in the last 8 years that police have killed Black people for no reason:

- In 2012, an off-duty police officer shot [Rekia Boyd](#) in the back of her head. She was walking home with friends.
- In 2014, a police officer choked [Eric Garner](#) until he died. Eric Garner told the police 11 times that he could not breathe.
- In 2014, a police officer shot [Michael Brown](#) six times. He had his hands up and was asking not to be hurt.

- In 2014, a police officer shot 12-year-old [Tamir Rice](#). He was playing with a toy gun. Police claimed they thought it was a real gun.
- In 2015, a police officer shot [Walter Scott](#) five times in the back, after pulling him over because one of his brake lights did not work.
- In 2016, a police officer shot [Philando Castile](#) seven times in his car. The police had pulled him over because he was Black. His partner and her 4-year-old daughter were in the car.
- In 2016, two police officers shot [Alton Sterling](#) six times while they were restraining him on the ground.
- In 2018, two police officers shot [Stephon Clark](#) eight times while he stood in his grandparents' backyard. They claimed that they thought his cell phone was a gun.
- In 2018, an off-duty police officer shot [Botham Jean](#) after breaking into his home. She claimed that she thought he was in *her* home.
- In 2019, a police officer shot [Atatiana Jefferson](#) through the window of her home while she was babysitting her nephew.
- In 2020, police broke into [Breonna Taylor's](#) home and shot her nine times while she slept.
- In 2020, a police officer knelt on [George Floyd's](#) neck for almost 9 minutes, choking him to death, while other police officers stood by and let him. George Floyd told the police that he was dying, and they made jokes about it.

These are just a few examples. There have been many, many more times when police killed Black people for no reason. And there are even more times when police *hurt* Black people for no reason.

The law is set up to make it easier for police to get away with hurting people. For example, police are not supposed to put people in danger. But when they do, the law makes it hard to punish them. There are lots of rules that make it harder for people to win in court against police.

When the police hurt or kill someone for no reason, they usually don't get in trouble. We gave 12 examples of times when police murdered Black people. In 7 of these examples, the police who murdered someone got away with it. Many of them were never even charged with a crime. In 2 of the examples, the police went to jail. In the last 3 examples, we are still waiting to find out if the police will go to jail for murder.

These are all reasons why people are angry about police violence right now. We are angry too.

## Police violence and disability

Police violence affects people with disabilities. It especially affects Black people with disabilities. Here are some ways police violence hurts people with disabilities:

- Up to half of the people hurt by police are people with disabilities.
- When police kill people, they blame the person's disability. For example:
  - Sometimes, police choke someone to death. Then, they try to say that the person died because they had asthma, high blood pressure, or another medical condition. But the person wouldn't have died if they weren't choked.
- Police think our disabilities mean that we are violent or suspicious. For example:
  - Autistic people might move differently. We might not make eye contact, and we might not talk. We might not be able to understand directions. We might have meltdowns. Police officers can say these things are threatening. Police officers have arrested, hurt, and sometimes killed many autistic people.
  - Many of the people killed by the police are having mental health problems. People with mental health disabilities are not more violent than anyone else. But police think they are. Instead of helping the person calm down, the police shoot them.
  - Deaf people might not be able to hear what a police officer is saying. The police have shot Deaf people for not following directions, even when other people are yelling that the person is Deaf.
- Police are in schools. Sometimes a kid with a disability will be having a problem. When that happens, teachers are supposed to help. But sometimes, school police will come instead. Instead of helping, police will arrest the kid. Often, they will hurt the kid.

- Police are in hospitals. If someone in a hospital is upset and having problems, the doctors are supposed to help them. But sometimes, they call the police instead. Then, the police arrest the person and take them to jail. They might hurt the person. This also means the person does not get the health care they needed in the hospital.
- People with disabilities get put in jail more often than people without disabilities.

None of these things should happen to anyone, whether or not they have a disability. But they do. They happen more often to people with disabilities. And, they happen most often to Black people with disabilities.

## What to do About police violence

Police violence is wrong. It needs to stop. There are things you can do to help.

*You can support the Black Lives Matter movement.* The protest movement you might hear the most about is called Black Lives Matter. They try to stop police from hurting and killing people. They want to make police follow the rules. They also want to change the rules so that they are more fair to Black people.

*“Why is it called Black Lives Matter? Why not all lives?”* It is called that because Black people are under attack by the police. When police kill Black people they don’t get in trouble very often. When that happens, our society is not acting like Black lives matter. It is important to say Black lives matter because we want to change how our society treats Black people.

*You can advocate to change how the police work in your community.*

There are laws and rules that say what police can and cannot do. You can advocate to make those laws and rules better.

The website Campaign Zero has 10 ideas for what to change. Some of the ideas are:

- Put communities in charge of the police.
- Make it illegal for police to hurt people for no reason.
- Don’t let the police get weapons from the military.
- If police kill someone, there should be a trial.

Campaign Zero has a lot of information. They explain how you can help your town or state make big changes. You can use their resources to stop police violence.

We can also spend less money on the police. Every town and every state has to decide how it will spend its money. Right now, a lot of towns and states spend a lot of money on the police. We could decide to spend less money on the police. Then, we could spend more money on other things, like schools or health care. There are lots of ways to take care of our communities that aren't police. We can spend money on taking care of each other, instead of on the police. Then, there can be fewer police. This idea is also called **defunding the police**.

When people talk about fixing the police, they often talk about training. They think that police need training on racism. They think that police need training about people with disabilities. They think that police need training on how to do their job without hurting people. Training can be good. But, police already get a lot of this training. They know that they are not supposed to hurt people. But they keep hurting people. Training is not enough.

We need to make more rules about what the police can and can't do. And we need to make the police follow those rules. If they break the rules, we need to hold them accountable. Making police follow the rules is called **police accountability**.

*Talk to people in your life about how police violence is wrong.*

Some people, usually white people, have wrong ideas about police violence. They think that police don't hurt anyone unless they really have to. The facts show that this is not true. You can talk to people about this. Then, those people can help fight to end police violence.



## Learn more

[Systemic Racism Explained](#)

[Remembering Stephon Watts Is Essential To Neurodiversity](#)

[Mapping Police Violence](#)

[8 Can't Wait](#)

[We Can't Breathe: The Deaf & Disabled Margin of Police Brutality Project and video](#)

[Talking About Race: National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)

[Vision For Justice](#)

["Defunding the Police" and People with Mental Illness](#)

[Ten for Justice](#)

[8 to Abolition](#)

If you are reading a printout of this booklet, you can find the links at <https://autisticadvocacy.org/police>.