

Race and Policing Topical Background

This August, 57 years after Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, thousands marched on Washington to protest the deaths of Black Americans by police officers. Black Americans are killed by police officers at more than double the rate of white Americans. Protests around specific incidences have heightened national attention on the issue and have encouraged calls for change and alternatives to policing such as defunding the police, creating community policing policies, and increasing the accountability of police officers.

Since the beginning of policing in America, law enforcement and people of color have had a contentious relationship. Scholars have claimed the first instance of a police force in the American colonies was a slave patrol in the Carolina colonies founded in 1704. These patrols worked to catch and punish enslaved peoples who attempted to run-away in search of freedom. Other historians have placed the start of formal police departments in New York, Albany, Chicago, and Philadelphia in the early 19th century. These northern police forces were overwhelmingly made up of white males and discriminated against Black officers and citizens. The genesis of policing in America has caused a long history of acts of racism and discrimination against people of color through discriminatory practices such as enforcing Jim Crow law.

In recent years, incidents of white police officers shooting and killing Black men and women have become national rallying points for protests and anger. For example, in April 2015, Freddy Gray, a Black man, was sent into a coma due to spine and neck injuries caused by police officers after being arrested for the possession of a pocketknife. Gray fell into a coma and died. His death was ruled a homicide. Six officers were charged in connection with Gray's murder but none were convicted. Protests broke out in Baltimore, Maryland across the U.S. in response to the murder of Freddie Gray. Protests and riots lasted into early May of that year, but tensions have been stoked after subsequent incidences of police killing Black individuals.

In May of this year, George Floyd was killed by officer Derek Chauvin, who knelt on Floyd's neck for over eight minutes after Floyd supposedly passed a fake bill. Two days later, protests began in Minneapolis, the same city that Philando Castile was killed in five years ago. Protestors and police clashed as police used rubber bullets and tear gas to disperse the protests after looting and vandalism began. At the end of August, Jacob Blake was shot seven times in the back after officers responded to a pair of women fighting. Blake survived, and the incident of his shooting fanned the flames of U.S. protestors and activists against police violence. Protests have continued to this day as protestors rally for justice surrounding the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed Black people who have been shot or killed by police officers.

By Logan Cort '22, Clarke Forum Student Project Manager

Works cited

Axelrod, T. (2020, August 29). Ex-Minneapolis officer involved in Floyd death asks judge to dismiss murder charge. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://thehill.com/regulation/court-battles/514262-ex-minneapolis-officer-in-floyd-death-asks-judge-to-dismiss-murder>

Buchanan, L., Bui, Q., & Patel, J. (2020, July 03). Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>

Hassett-Walker Assistant Professor of Justice Studies and Sociology, C. (2020, June 08). The racist roots of American policing: From slave patrols to traffic stops. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://theconversation.com/the-racist-roots-of-american-policing-from-slave-patrols-to-traffic-stops-112816>

Jacob Blake: Teenager arrested over Wisconsin protesters' deaths. (2020, August 26). Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-53926277>

Lopez, G. (2016, July 27). The Baltimore protests over Freddie Gray's death, explained. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/27/18089352/freddie-gray-baltimore-riots-police-violence>

McCarthy, N., & Richter, F. (2020, July 15). Infographic: U.S. Police Shootings: Blacks Disproportionately Affected. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://www.statista.com/chart/21857/people-killed-in-police-shootings-in-the-us/>

Potter, G. (2013, June 25). The History of Policing in the United States, Part 1. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://plsonline.eku.edu/insideloook/history-policing-united-states-part-1>

Taylor, D. (2020, May 30). George Floyd Protests: A Timeline. Retrieved August 30, 2020, from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/george-floyd-protests-timeline.html>