

Thoughtful Police Reform  
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Because the last few cases of murder of Black men by police or vigilantes were caught on video, this issue has finally forced those of us who never had such experiences to reconsider how we regard policing. Too few of us can imagine what it must be like to live in this country and be afraid. We do not send our teenage boys out of the house with the awareness that they might not come home unharmed.

My own experience with police, from childhood to today, has been that "the police are my friend." We children learned this in school (all of us white), and throughout my life, I have never had cause to think otherwise.

Several times, I was stopped for minor traffic offenses: not stopping long enough at a stop sign, exiting the freeway too slowly, or exceeding the speed limits by a few miles in a suburban neighborhood. All of those times (until recently) I was given a polite warning not to do it again. The recent time I rolled slowly through a stop sign I was nailed, and a policewoman checked, first, to find I had no police record, and then she issued me a ticket for \$265. I ruefully paid it.

How would someone like me know what so many people of color experience when they encounter the police? How many poor people with a faulty tail light, for example, or rolling slowly through a stop sign, can pay \$265? How many have records of unpaid fines, simply because they cannot pay them?

How many people of color, particularly Black people, are stopped by police who speak to them politely? We have recently seen, recorded on cell phones, hostile confrontations between the police and stopped drivers, some of these encounters deadly. Apparently, these apprehensions are not rare, and we are learning how many of them are violent. Even a well-dressed, well-spoken Black professional faces the danger of looking suspicious to the police.

The police have bad experiences too. We certainly believe that most police in this country have never fired their guns at anyone, and that the murderous police we have seen on TV are "bad apples." There is some truth in that, but why are there bad apples?

We cannot avoid the realization that racial bias is a systemic remnant of our original sin, slavery. We cannot avoid recognition that congested ghettos housing Black citizens with little money, with low expectation of jobs, with schooling inadequate to secure decent jobs, will also be rife with criminal activity. More Blacks are victimized by other Blacks than by police, yet police make it worse.

From the police experience, we cannot avoid seeing that poor Black communities are rife with crime, rife with young men hostile to the police, and awash with the weapons that flood this country thanks to the NRA. Police never know when someone they stop for traffic or other offenses is armed and dangerous. Police also know that even when they solicit information on criminals in those neighborhoods, the residents do not cooperate. There is no trust.

Now, in the face of the recent hideous police and vigilante murders, our country has finally reached the point of wanting to do something about it. Various communities have tried police reforms, some successful. Walking the beat in a Black neighborhood gradually creates relationships between police and citizens. They see each other face to face, and establish trust. With trust comes mutual courtesy and lower crime rates.

The biggest problem that must be resolved is the flood of guns in the hands of people who should not have them. A police call responding to domestic violence may well result in dead police if the wife-beater is armed. When police stop a car with a Black driver, they never know if the driver is armed. When they stop me, they assume that I am not.

We need gun control and reversal of systemic economic inequity in housing, schooling, and jobs. We cannot end 400 years of bad experience overnight, but we can, and must, live up to our better selves.

683 words

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