

Understanding The Protests

These talking points are provided to help educate and empower those who are not as familiar with racism or the politics around racism, especially in light of George Floyd and the ensuing protests. These points are not the official stance of any organization.

What is BLM?

From Wikipedia.org:

Black Lives Matter is an international human rights movement, originating in the African-American community, that campaigns against violence and systemic racism towards black people.

What is racism?

Racism is not an individual issue; it is a set of systems that isolates races in various ways and takes away their rights. People of all colors and types work in those systems - their unawareness and complacency are also part of racism.

All lives matter?

They do. It is also well established that black Americans are more likely to be killed by the police in any given interaction. They are more likely to be arrested for a crime they didn't commit. They are more likely to serve longer jail time for the same offenses. They are more likely to serve time at all. They are more likely to be considered for the death penalty. They are more likely to receive the death penalty.

The difference between Black Lives Matter and All Lives Matter is not merely linguistic. It could have been, if the originators of BLM chose to say ALM instead. But they chose BLM, and once that choice was made, and the movement supported that choice, saying anything outside of "BLM" became a detraction from BLM. This includes Blue Lives Matter (see below), All Lives Matter, and even the very similar Brown Lives Matter. The reasons why the first two are particularly egregious is because Blue (police) and All (in America, "all" is by far majorly white) lives are well protected by a number of racist systems, privileges, and immunity.

If all lives truly mattered, then the punishments and benefits a life received would not be dependent on the color of their skin. Some lives matter more than others; we want to fix that.

Blue lives matter?

See "Black cops are bad too?" below.

Police officers are currently held to a lower standard than civilians in use of force.¹ They have no consistent test for character and ethics, nor are they adequately trained to deescalate or

¹ Compare "objective reasonableness" in *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386, 392 (1989) to "necessary" in David C. Brody & James R. Acker, *Criminal Law* 130 (2014), which is the standard in most states, see: http://www.ncdsv.org/images/NCPOFFC_Self-Defense-Statutes_5-2012.pdf and <https://www.amnestyusa.org/reports/deadly-force-police-use-of-lethal-force-in-the-united-states>

evade dangerous situations². They are still given the sole legal use of lethal force in America and are also afforded almost universal immunity for using that force. Even when they are not immune, they frequently retain all pension and retirement benefits. Police officers are killed on the job no more than unarmed EMS, and in both cases, they are killed incomparably to black Americans.

Blue lives do matter just as much as black lives do. However, being an officer is a chosen profession that can be regulated, tested, and trained as desired. It is not a physical trait that is currently being killed, jailed, fired, or denied standards of living as often as black lives are.

What are these racist systems, privileges, and immunities?

Nonblacks in America are hired more often, get paid more, and have to pay less for the same standard of living as black Americans. Nonblacks in America are less likely to be killed, less likely to be kicked out of school, redistricted away from resources, and unable to take basic classes in school. Nonblacks are less likely to be accosted in the night, to be denied access to their property, and to be questioned on their actions. This list is perpetual, and numerous studies have shown these trends. An easy example: hiring managers were more likely to call back a white name than a black one on the exact same resume.³

The racist choices and laws that built these systems are well documented, and far too numerous to list here. A good starting point is “The Case for Reparations” by Ta-Nehisi Coates.

This black cop died, why does his life not matter?

It does. BLM is screaming for his life too. Whether or not he was a cop does not change this. We are screaming for the fact that, as a black man, he faced unnecessary and unfair obstacles in many part of his life. He faced unfair obstacles in becoming a cop too.

No BLM protester is protesting based on the profession, politics, or opinions of George Floyd or this police officer. BLM stands for the fact that ALL black people, in ALL walks of life in America face unnecessary racism.

Whether a person killed is a cop or a civilian, BLM will fight for the same thing: that neither should have dealt with the racism they dealt with, regardless of if that racism was involved in their death. Remember, racism is not an individual issue; it is a set of systems that isolates races in various ways and takes away their rights. People of all colors and types work in that system - their unawareness and complacency are a part of racism.

All cops are not bad, see this one is good!

All Cops Are Bad does not mean that each individual officer had bad intentions. It means that the entire institution of police is so poorly trained, so poorly organized, and so heavily affected by racism⁴, that no matter how well intentioned some individual officers are, they

² <https://www.apmreports.org/story/2017/05/05/police-de-escalation-training>

³ <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/minorities-who-whiten-job-resumes-get-more-interviews>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/opinions/systemic-racism-police-evidence-criminal-justice-system/>

cannot outweigh the bias of the institution. Further, the police institutions are not held accountable for when these biases cause unfortunate results.

The majority of police training is focused on altercation tactics. Even among post-academy training, the most popular classes are centered around firearm training and fighting tactics. Police are very well trained to handle physical, violent altercations, and this training undoubtedly biases their choice of actions. The majority of a police officer's job, however, is not altercations. It is neighborhood arguments and traffic stops.⁵

The fact that neighborhood disputes are the most common police call is not a coincidence. Many neighborhoods in America were specifically districted to have racial boundaries, to create racial tensions, and to deprive certain races of resources. Those neighborhoods were given larger police departments instead of the resources they needed. The individual police officer had no control of this. But the officer still fell into a situation where they had to represent a racist system in a racially oppressed neighborhood.

When the officer ends up making a mistake or hurting someone in that situation, rarely do they face accountability. The officer rarely gets punished, or retrained, and the department just as rarely changes its policies or actions. Instead the officer will most likely remain in the department, unaffected, or at worst get a new job with a new department.⁶ In the rare few situations where the outcome faced a public response, most officers are retired with benefits. No officer, good or bad, has any incentive to improve themselves in such a system.

All Cops Are Bad does not mean that each individual officer has bad intentions. It means that the officer has no choice but to work in a racist system where racist decisions put the officers in racist positions. No matter how well intentioned the officer is, a thousand racist laws and a million racist dollars forced that officer to respond to a racist problem that they did not create. If the good officer inevitably gets trapped in those situations, imagine what the bad officers would do. If the bad officers face no punishment, how can the good officers help?

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This protester did a horrible thing, the cops should attack them, right?

Cops are police officers. Not judges, juries, or executioners. It is not a police officer's job to do any of those three things. A police officer is equipped with numerous tools, from tasers and pepper spray to handcuffs and zip ties, to subdue and control a potential threat. If an officer does not feel that they can subdue adequately, they ask for more officers to help. The group of officers then follow their guidelines. This is not personal to the officer; the officer does not have a duty to enact justice or extend the boundaries of their profession.

When a doctor does not feel they can perform a surgery adequately, they do not try. If an officer cannot constitutionally do their duties, they should not try. The obsession with fixing a situation that one is not prepared or trained to fix, and the willingness to bend or break rules to do so, is exactly the type of thinking that the police exist to prevent. Do not start using the very thinking you want to eliminate.

⁵ <https://www.policedatainitiative.org/datasets/calls-for-service/>

⁶ <https://www.usatoday.com/in-depth/news/investigations/2019/04/24/usa-today-revealing-misconduct-records-police-cops/3223984002>

As an added note on expanding duties: a doctor goes above and beyond by being courteous and kind to a patient, not by attempting procedures they are incapable of doing. Similarly, an officer goes above and beyond by being courteous and kind to their community, not by attempting to punish or kill when they should be subduing.

Protesting during a pandemic seems counterproductive?

We should not have to protest during a pandemic. It is a dangerous time to be protesting, especially since a number of protestors are black, and the pandemic has disproportionately affected black people. There are two important things to consider when protesting during a pandemic:

First, if you do not feel safe protesting: do not protest. Protesting is inherently dangerous and protesting in a way that spreads danger is irresponsible. The injustices being protested will not end overnight; the protests will need to continue until they do end – well past the end of the pandemic. If you wish to help in ways other than protesting, then do not protest. If you feel better protesting after the virus has been contained, then protest after.

Second, many black Americans have realized that they are far more likely to die of the pandemic virus than nonblacks. They were not given the resources to survive the pandemic; these, and more, are the very resources they are protesting for. They have been told in the past to protest “after the bad timing” only to be told that there is no “good timing” to demand civil rights. This has led to a feeling of hopelessness. Black Americans are put in a situation where they are more likely to die whether or not they protest, and they have no guarantee that their protests will be heard if they wait.

Protesting during a pandemic is dangerous. We should protest in ways that do not spread disease. But when black Americans have been denied the resources necessary to survive the pandemic, it is understandable that they would want to risk disease and protest. We should protest when it is safe to, but many feel that such a time will never exist.

Who is going to keep you safe without cops?

The notion that this movement seeks to get rid of police is untrue. The movement wants three major changes: Accountability for police actions, reprioritization of funds, and more adequate training to “serve and protect.” To elaborate:

Accountability includes no more ‘qualified immunity,’ a principle in America that gives automatic, and widespread immunity to cops for what they do on the job – including killing innocent civilians. Specific immunity may be appropriate, but it needs to be clearly defined so that elected representatives can change it when needed. Similarly, duty to act laws, scope of duty laws, and appropriate levels of liability, both criminal and civil, for breaching those laws, are examples of accountability.⁷ Every major profession has accountability, including the police. But currently, that accountability is neither enforced nor does it match the lethal power given to police.

Reprioritization of funds is not defunding the police out of existence. Rather, it is the recognition that police wear far too many hats: from social worker to medics to militiamen in

⁷<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/56996151cbced68b170389f4/t/57e1b5cc2994ca4ac1d97700/1474409936835/Police+Use+of+Force+Report.pdf>

various communities. Rather than training one group of officers and expecting them to do all of the above, reapportion funding to actually hire the correct individuals to serve and help the community. Better distribution of funds to schools, for example, is known to decrease crime more adequately than purchasing excess military equipment for police.⁸

More adequate training recognizes that, even with new employees taking over jobs that cops should not be doing, cops will still be doing a lot. Cops will still be first on the scene to medical and physical emergencies. Cops will be first on the scene to extremely violent riots. If we are serious about cops actually helping the community, police need to be trained in how to actually protect people - that means being able to subdue a violent riot without adding to the violence. Far too many police during these protests have shown that they were very unprepared.

How are black cops bad too?

Unfortunately, good people of all races can make bad cops when put in a bad system. Cops, collectively, make decisions based on racist norms, racist data, and racist laws. When a police force designates a neighborhood as a dangerous area, those neighborhoods are usually historically predominantly black. Even if the redirecting of police resources to “bad” areas is done without the consideration of race, it has racist effects. The system that made those neighborhoods overwhelmingly black is racist. The system that denied them the jobs, healthcare, and resources to thrive in “good” ways is racist. When a black cop functions as a member of that racist system, he becomes a bad cop.

When a cop, of any race, relies on a racist system to make decisions, especially violent decisions, that is a racist decision. Since far too many police officers, including black ones, become comfortable in their professional privilege and immunity, they are far less likely to notice when they make these racist decisions. That is bad. Remember, racism is not an individual issue; it is a set of systems that isolates races in various ways and takes away their rights. People of all colors and types work in that system - their unawareness and complacency are a part of racism.

This cop is trying to fix that racist system though!

That is amazing to hear. Genuinely. Unfortunately, that cop is not the majority. If they were, then we would be seeing substantial change throughout departments and cities at much faster paces. Instead, the majority of change only happens after large protests.

The fact is that the isolation of communities and the militarization of police is a very old problem in America. It has lasted for decades in its current form, and much longer in others. Cops trying to change the system have existed for just as long, and they are exactly what we need. But we need many many more of them; we need a majority of them. Until we have a majority, the institution of police is still a bad system, doing bad things. Remember, racism is not an individual issue; it is a set of systems that isolates races in various ways and takes away their rights. People of all colors and types work in that system - their unawareness and complacency are a part of racism.

⁸<https://populardemocracy.org/sites/default/files/Freedom%20To%20Thrive%2C%20Higher%20Res%20Version.pdf>

If mostly black neighborhoods are the problem, then can you blame cops for being racist?

You are right in that cops bear an unusual amount of responsibility in oppression - they are the most common interaction between the oppressive systems and the oppressed communities. However, despite any trends or characterizations that an officer develops in their mind, their respect of other humans and those human's rights should not change even slightly.

We are not asking police to shoulder the overhaul of the entire system. We are asking them to stop acting inhumane, and to stop getting in the way when we try to make systemic changes to the laws, economics, and politics that will lighten the burden on both the oppressed, and the officers trying to help them. Remember, racism is not an individual issue; it is a set of systems that isolates races in various ways and takes away their rights. People of all colors and types work in that system - their unawareness and complacency are a part of racism.

But more black people are killed by other blacks than by nonblacks and cops?

American racism is no longer just the choice of one race to oppress another. Racism is the continual and systemic oppression through a variety of infrastructures – not all of which come from the dominant race in a region. Black people in general face enormous amounts of violence due to systems that isolated them due to their race. A lot of this violence is from other black people, who were put in the same isolation.

In the context of police brutality, the violence that occurs between black people in America is part of the racism that we want cops to be able to help with. Cops should be prepared to help communities where poverty and oppression has pitted the oppressed against each other. If the police are approaching the situation with existing violent tendencies, then they will hurt an already violent situation more.

To further this point, we know that violence is common, especially amongst communities who have not been given appropriate opportunities to express themselves. But violence from police, who exist to serve and protect, is a different level of unacceptable. The police are professional mediators, not serendipitous bystanders. They should be held to the high professional standards that they are hired to enforce – this includes not adding violence to a situation that needs help.

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What about the criminals that are getting away because of all the restrictions on police?

That is a huge problem. And a devastating one. It is just like all of the innocent people that are getting punished due to flaws in the system. Both of these problems - criminals getting away, and innocents getting punished - are exactly the reason that BLM wants to change the system for the better, not only to prevent innocents from being punished, and to catch criminals, but to prevent crimes overall by fixing community disparities.

The key point here, however, is that police have a certain latitude to “catch” criminals that might “get away” from the common methods of punishments. Those latitudes do NOT include taking away people’s rights and humanity (even criminals), and those latitudes do NOT include asking a police officer to exact judgement or punishment. While it is great that an officer feels empowered to seek out more justice than their job includes, they should use their political voice to discuss that, not their policing power.

As a final, positive point, these changes are working!

These changes are working, in big cities where protesters spoke up, fewer people are being killed. Now we just need to bring it to every corner of America, and then the World.⁹

⁹ <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/police-are-killing-fewer-people-in-big-cities-but-more-in-suburban-and-rural-america/>