

Black Lives Matter, But Why Now?

On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, an unarmed 46-year-old African American male suffocated under the knee of former officer Derek Chauvin, a white male. Onlookers watched and recorded the scene in horror as Floyd pleaded and cried, “I can’t breathe.” After 8 minutes and 46 seconds of being held in this chokehold position, Floyd died from suffocation. When the videos taken at the scene were released, an uproar erupted throughout the country and the world. Despite the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, thousands of people flooded to the streets to protest Floyd’s death as well as the deaths of countless other unarmed black people. These protests lasted for a little over a month and still continue in certain parts of the country. This is not the first time protests have taken place after the death of an unarmed African American. The deaths of Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and Trayvon Martin, among others, all sparked protests in the name of Black Lives Matter movement and brought national attention to the systemic racism that exists in police departments and local governments all across the country, yet none of them have brought as much attention and change as the untimely death of George Floyd. In the wake of the recent tragedy, multiple countries across the world have taken up Black Lives Matter protests, brands have made changes to their racist images, actors have stepped down from parts that take away from black representation, multiple police departments have banned chokeholds—not to mention the dismantling of the Minneapolis police department—and Congress has started working on legislation introducing major police reforms. This is only the tip of the iceberg and begs the question: what is it about the death of Floyd that has called so many people to action? The answer can be found in three factors: the existence of video proof, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and the cultural and political climate in the United States.

The video showing the death of George Floyd was extremely hard to watch for many. Not only could Floyd's pleas for help clearly be heard, but so could the calls of bystanders begging the officers at the scene to make sure Floyd could breathe and had a pulse. A few factors made this video pivotal in the movement and protests to come that set Floyd's death apart from others deaths of its kind. The first is the existence of a video at all. Many times when young unarmed black men are killed by the police, there is often no video proof which makes it hard to prosecute police that are already heavily protected by laws and unions. The video presence makes it undeniable that Officer Chauvin's actions led to Floyd's death and clearly shows that Floyd complained of inability to breath multiple times. The presence of the video also shows its audience that there were multiple other officers at the scene who did nothing to help Floyd or stop Officer Chauvin from keeping him in this chokehold position. This made the video particularly disturbing and hard to digest for many Americans who had never seen a police killing in such a manner. So often people who are not directly affected by police brutality can easily ignore it, especially when there is no video proof. The presence of a video forces both Americans and other people of the world to recognize that police brutality is real.

The second factor is the fact that the video was not taken from a police body camera. Body cameras became popular for some of the same reasons that the presence of the video were important. They allow the audience to see exactly what was happening and help hold police responsible for their actions. However, there are some flaws to these "body cams". For starters, these cameras only show events from the point of view of the officer of whom they are on. This limits the viewer from seeing the officer's actions and only shows the actions of the parties the officer is interacting with. Though some claim that this is helpful in seeing things from the perspective of the officer, it cuts out the entire narrative of the other party in the interaction.

Another flaw with body cam videos is that they are often extremely difficult to access.

Oftentimes when police body cams capture footage of events that will result in controversy, the videos are put under evidence and may never reach the public without a fight from members of the community. Because the video was taken by bystanders using their personal devices, the Minneapolis police department could not control these images or stop them from spreading.

The final factor is the sheer gruesomeness of the video itself. Viewers not only see the pain on Floyd's face, but they can also hear Floyd call for his dead mother and repeatedly cry out that he cannot breathe. For people in the African American community, though the video is hard to watch and deeply saddening and infuriating, it is a scene that is painfully familiar. Part of the why this video is so eye opening is because it is clear that from Floyd's position, Officer Chauvin nor any of the other present officers were in harm's way, yet, Floyd is still being treated in a way that would suggest otherwise which deeply contradicts the majority's view of how police officers act or should act. According to multiple studies, including the *Mapping Police Violence Project*, African Americans are three times more likely to be killed by police than any other race. This poses a huge problem for the people in the African American community because they are more likely than anyone to be killed by the very people whose job it is to protect them. This not only causes a rift in African American citizens' trust of the police, but it also creates a funnel of where the information about police brutality goes. As reported by the United States Census Bureau, African Americans only make up 13.4 percent of American citizens, making them a clear minority. Therefore, the majority of Americans do not have to worry about the issue of police brutality because it does not affect them in the same way it does African Americans. The eye-opening gruesomeness of the video showing George Floyd's death

forces the majority of the population to see that what the African American community has been fighting and struggling with is real and right in front of their faces

Having seen and realized the injustice done in the death of George Floyd, thousands of people in all 50 states and even some countries such as Britain and Germany took to the streets to protest the death of Floyd and countless others like him. However, there was and is a looming threat that overlooked these protests: COVID-19. The COVID-19 coronavirus has wreaked havoc across the globe since December of 2019 and has caused over 130,000 deaths in the United States alone. During the time of Floyd's death, the United States was in the thick of the virus-related turmoil with many states placing stay-at-home orders in order to flatten the curve. Though the virus posed a threat to the general public, thousands still gathered (many sporting masks to help protect themselves and others) to march and protest Floyd's death. Though the coronavirus can be seen as just another obstacle to protestors, it actually played a huge role in how and why protestors were able to come out in such large numbers.

The majority of those out protesting, especially in the beginning, were young adults within the age range of 18-29, a group of people heavily affected by the virus. This age range not only consists of students home from school, but also those laid off or temporarily unemployed due to the virus. With more free time than normal, this demographic was able to take to the streets and protest for days on end. Another massively important characteristic about this demographic is their increased social media presence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This age demographic spends more time online than any other, and this made a huge difference in spreading awareness of George Floyd's death as well as the systematic problems within the nations' police departments. With apps like TikTok and Instagram, which allow its users to create and share videos and pictures, social media became flooded not only with content bringing

awareness, but also with infographics and videos of how to be safe while protesting as well as information about bail funds in case one was to get arrested. There have also been minor changes through social media as well which do not necessarily affect police reform by point to an overall change in racial attitudes such as the rebranding of companies like Aunt Jemima's Syrup, Uncle Ben's Rice, and the Washington Redskins. Though these effects are positive, the negative effects of the virus are important as well.

Though COVID-19 is affecting the entire population, African Americans are suffering at a much higher rate than other demographics, "nearly two times greater than would be expected based on their share of the population". This is due to a variety of factors that point to discriminatory undertones within the United State such as the higher probability that African Americans will have essential jobs that cannot be done from home such as nursing home workers, grocery store clerks, cleaners, and warehouse workers, etc. as well as the fact that African Americans have higher rates of underlying conditions such as diabetes and heart disease, but they also have much lower rates of steady health insurance. This dangerous mix of factors points to structural discrimination against African Americans and is another reason why many chose to take to the streets and protest the racial injustices in the country.

With all the racial issues going on in the country, it would seem like the best solution is to start working towards change. However, in order to make those changes, a decided majority needs to enter the narrative and take action. These changes happen quicker when led by someone willing to help foster this change which the United States is not. President Donald Trump, who was not elected by majority vote, but by the electoral college, has been a dividing force in American politics since his candidacy for president in 2016. Throughout the time of the protests, he has declined to condemn white supremacy, villainized protestors, and failed to point

out key issues in the nation's police departments despite public backlash as well as advice from his own staff. Trump's actions have fostered a sense of justification for those in the United States who continue to say that there are no systemic racial problems in our police departments and in the United States as a whole. This narrative, however, has been proven wrong time and time again, and the more that it is encouraged by leadership in the United States, the angrier the people have become.

The death of George Floyd was many things. It was tragic, senseless, and cruel, but for many, it was also eye opening. The changes that have happened so far despite the pushback from the nation's leadership have been phenomenal and are still continuing to flow. That being said, I would suggest multiple policy reforms toward our nation's police such as a countrywide ban on chokeholds as well as a reevaluation of the duties of police, followed by a reallocation of funds towards hiring mental health and social servant specialists to assist on calls. Because of all of the difficulties the nation is facing at this time, the people are becoming increasingly tired of the problems within the systems that make up the structure of not only the nation's police departments but the nation as a whole and finally working to bring about a change. Only time will tell if these changes will prevail.

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