

“The Trauma of Living Black Lives”  
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The reality of Black lives in North America can be told in statistics.

- in 2018 police killed 1,166 people across the US. Black people were 25% of those killed despite being only 13% of the US population
- so far in 2019, there have been 221 police shootings. African descendant people are still 25% of that number

Meanwhile, in Canada, on December 10, 2018, The Globe and Mail reported the following: “While black people made up only 8.8 per cent of Toronto’s population in 2016, the report found they were involved in seven out of 10 cases of fatal shootings by police during the latter period. It found that black people (and specifically black men) were overrepresented in everything from investigations into use of force and sexual assault by police, to inappropriate or unjustified searches and charges.” (<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/toronto/article-report-reveals-racial-disparities-in-toronto-polices-use-of-force/>) The data came from a study conducted by the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

The report also found that, from 2013 to 2017, black people were represented in 36 out of 125 of the police use-of-force cases that resulted in serious injury or death; nine out of 15 police shootings that resulted in serious injury or death; and eight out of 13 use-of-force cases that resulted in civilian death. This is the trauma of Black living.

There are multiple studies to be found which point to the fact that there are racial disparities in how police use force and in particular how police brutality is affecting Black communities in the US and Canada. They document how blacks are being killed at a disproportionately higher rate than whites by excess use of force by an over militarized police force in major cities coupled with the on-going stereotyping of African descendant people.

On November 13, 2018, the New York Times ran an article entitled “Hate Crimes Increase for the Third Consecutive Year, FBI Reports.” The article stated that there were more than 7100 hate crimes reported in 2017. This was a 17% increase over 2016. The article further notes that hate crimes are voluntarily reported and go largely unreported. Of the hate crimes reported nearly half of the hate crime victims were Black.

A similar pattern was noted in Canada. According to the 2017 “Reported Hate Crime Report-2017”: “After steady but relatively small increases since 2014, police-reported hate crime in Canada rose sharply in 2017, up 47% over the previous year, and largely the result of an increase in hate-related property crimes, such as graffiti and vandalism. For the year, police reported 2,073 hate crimes, 664 more than in 2016.” The report further states that In 2017, 43% of all police-reported hate crime was motivated by hatred of a race or ethnicity. That year, police reported 878 crimes motivated by hatred of a race or ethnicity, up 32% from the previous year. This increase was the result of 107 more hate crimes targeting the Black population (+50%) and 30 more incidents targeting Arab or West Asian populations (+27%). Hate crimes targeting the Black population accounted for 16% of all hate crimes in Canada, and remained the most common type of race or ethnicity related hate crime (<https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/181129/dq181129a-eng.htm?HPA=1>).

Last week, we watched as yet another white police officer was acquitted for killing a black teenager. In this case, it was 17 year old Antwon Rose II who was gunned down. His murderer a white police officer was charged with homicide. It mattered not that the officer’s testimony was inconsistent, or that he shot Antwon Rose II three times in the back. A jury of his peers, consistent with other juries across the United

States, set the now former police officer free. That he is no longer a police officer is not enough in this or any other case. What the statistics prove repeatedly is that Black lives are inconsequential. What we have consistently seen in cases of police brutality and the execution of Blacks in the street is that there will be little to no justice in a system that continues to show that Black lives do not matter.

This narrative holds true when we examine the prison population which is disproportionately over represented with Black bodies. The prison industrial complex with its corresponding commodification of Black bodies as a new form of free labor is at best a new-colonial capitalist structure utilizing slavery to maximize profits. This too is well documented along with the fact that Black students are disproportionately targeted in schools for more severe punishment at younger and younger ages.

A study conducted by the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights shows that Black preschoolers make up more than half of all out-of-school suspensions for preschoolers. Black children represent 16% of the pre-school population but 48% of all preschool children receiving more than one out-of-school suspension were Black. Boys represented 79% of preschool children suspended once and 82% of children suspended more than once. This same study prepared in March 2014, also points to the fact that while Black students represent 16% of student enrollment, they represent 27% of students referred to law enforcement, and 31% of students subjected to a school related arrest (<https://orcddata.ed.gov/downloads/CRDC-School-Discipline-Snapshot.pdf>).

These statistics join a host of others about complaint calls to police departments by White people who are displeased by the actions of Blacks including grilling in a park, swimming in a neighborhood pool and driving down the street. These statistics document the trauma of living Black lives in North America.

We can get bogged down in the numbers and miss the severe reality of life in Black skin in this 21st century. There are many who desire to separate the experiences of people of African descent from a history of commodification and brutality from the observations of racism in these days and times in which we live. This is history repeating itself through a process of kidnapped people bought and sold as chattel, human lives rendered as animals and beasts, and brutality disregarded because the lives of African descendant people are seen as not being worth anything. This is the trauma of black living.

I would like to suggest that in our many spheres of human services we are failing to address the trauma of living in black bodies. What we read as statistics translate into parents burying their children, young people denied access to human rights, dignity and freedom and on-going human rights violations that continue to be documented and in the same way continue to go unaddressed. Each statistic is a life. It is the story of orphaned children, of witnessing trauma in our current social media feeds and living with the knowledge that even when we are right, there is the possibility that calling the police will result in our being made to be perpetrators instead of victims.

Such was the case of Dyma Loving. Loving called the police after her white neighbor pulled a shotgun on her and threatened to shoot her. When police arrived on the scene, Loving found herself handcuffed, in a headlock and on the ground. Loving is quoted as saying: He made me feel like nothing. I don't feel safe anymore... I could never call the police again." She wondered like many others about the safety of her children and who will protect them if something were to happen to them (<https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/details-emerge-in-viral-arrest-video-victims-speak-after-violent-arrest-by-miami-date-police-1117596>). Another viral video, another family traumatized and yet another story of the dehumanization of Black lives in the streets. The on-going trauma is real.

The problems of racism in North America is not relegated to prisons, school systems and the documentation of police brutality. Racism, I might add, is neither the fault nor product of racialized minorities in North America. Racism is the product of White supremacy and white privilege. Racism and

discrimination are not problems created by African descendant or other racialized minorities globally. Racism and discrimination are products of systems and nations that value some lives over others and reinforce racist behaviors and validate the practices of racist institutions. The vestiges of colonialism and imperialism are alive and well. They are present to ensure that the same fears and myths that supported the buying and selling of African people persist in the dehumanized treatment of Blacks in North America.

Racism permeates every facet of society. It is in our schools and in our churches. We find it in the airport and grocery stores. Racism is present in the mall and on television. Racism and the accompanying instruments of White privilege, White supremacy and a supremacist Christian narrative continue to be a source of oppression for Black lives.

I am an ordained Christian minister and I work for a major mainline denomination in the United States. We too are plagued by racism in the church. If you ask individuals of color who are members of predominantly White churches they too have stories that are at best incongruous with the love that is stated as a tenet of every major world religion and spiritual system. This is the trauma of Black living. There appears to be very few spaces and places where Black lives are absent from the trauma of racism that is rooted in stereotyping and bigoted behaviors.

But what of this trauma? What does this mean for Black people in the United States and Canada?

The week of July 4, 2016 the world witnessed the deaths of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile. Alton Sterling was murdered at close range by two white police officers in Baton Rouge, LA. Philando Castile was murdered the following day on July 6th in Falcon Heights, MN. Castile's girlfriend and their 4 year old daughter were both present in the car when he was shot multiple times by a police officer standing at close range next to the window of the car. On July 7th, police officers were ambushed in Dallas, TX by an armed black man. Five officers were killed, nine others injured and two civilians wounded. It was a traumatizing week as these images played over and over on the television and in social media.

I remember that week well. I was in London for meetings and by Friday the 8th, I could not get out of bed. I called my son to see how he was doing. We were on the phone for over 3 hours which included long periods of silence. He was 28 years old, a husband and the father of a four year old. I will never forget his words to me that day. He said: "I am clear that when I leave my house in the morning, I may not make it back home." This is a conscious reality of the trauma that exists for Black people in a society where extrajudicial killings and the acquittal of murderers is common place.

The trauma is rooted in the images that play repeatedly every time another Black body is lying in the streets. The advent of social media has been a blessing in that these incidents are being made public and are documenting the conditions that Black communities have been naming for years. These images have also had a negative impact. We have seen the disregard of officers caught on tape shooting young people as was the case of Tamir Rice, and handcuffing young mourners like his sister. This too is trauma.

We can point to the overt acts of racism that are seen and then there are the microaggressions. These actions are often dismissed as misunderstandings by majority culture. Microaggressions are dismissive of human dignity and are disrespectful at the very least. These include but are not limited to being followed by security in a store, having dominant culture individuals step in front of marginalized people on a line, the list is too long to name. These are the daily incidents that are faced.

While our churches are in no way exempt from the need to change policies and practices to eliminate racism, many have taken on the hard work of addressing the challenges racism are presenting in the US. The World Council of Churches has adopted a focus on racial justice, as the National Council of

Churches in the United States. Our churches must be focused on ensuring that our structures are devoid of racism. We must be willing to tell the truth about the legacies we inherited and we must be willing to hear the voices of marginalized communities and bring those voices to the center of this work we desire to do.

Hearing the voices of the marginalized means hearing the stories, experiences and the pain that communities, families and individuals are experiencing. Recent studies have shown that Blacks are experiencing higher rates of post-traumatic stress disorder as a result of this racism that has been normalized as a part of living.

Findings from large-scale national studies indicate that, while African Americans have a lower risk for many anxiety disorders, they have a 9.1% prevalence rate for PTSD, compared to 6.8% in Whites (Himle et al, 2009). That means that almost one in ten Black people becomes traumatized (Malcoun, Williams, & Bahojb-Nouri, 2015).

(<https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/culturally-speaking/201509/the-link-between-racism-and-ptsd>).

We are the descendants of people who were brought into the Americas as enslaved people. This was an action imposed upon our Ancestors by Europeans who used the free labor of African bodies as machines to work plantations. There are those who would attempt to redact that history and minimize its affects on the current treatment of Blacks in North America. However, this history must continue to be acknowledged and Europeans and their descendants in North America must come to a point to acknowledging that the demonization of Black lives and the glorification of whiteness are both problematic. Justice must prevail, requiring changes in our institutions, our policies, our policing and our legal systems. The human rights of African descendant people are being violated at alarming rates and this needs to be addressed.

My son and others in the Black community understand the fragility of Black living. There is a consciousness that we carry which translates every statistic into a life which could be ours, or that of someone we know. It is the experience of living with the on-going knowledge that being Black is dangerous living. It can get you stigmatized, injured, or killed. This is the trauma of Black living.