

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/how-can-we-change-a-system-set-up-to-control-black-people-by-radically-dismantling-it>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

When a police officer callously disregards and kills a man pleading for his life for nine excruciating minutes while held in a fatal choke hold leaving a six-year-old daughter without her father and hurting so many others who loved the man affectionately known as Big Floyd that officer must be held accountable. But when that officer belongs to a police department where 44 other people lost consciousness as a result of that same practice, it is indicative of a much larger problem that must be systemically addressed.

The senseless and violent deaths of Black people like George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and David McAtee at the hands of law enforcement are not isolated incidents. They are examples of an unjust and oppressive system that is weaponized against Black people. Though the just prosecution of officers involved in acts of police brutality is necessary, it has not prevented and will not prevent the next deadly police encounter. The pain, sadness, and outrage that we are experiencing as a nation demands more than individual accountability. It is time for us to radically dismantle a system that dehumanizes and devalues Black people by finally confronting the root of the problem: our nation's legacy of slavery and white supremacy. It is time for some truth-telling about a criminal legal system that was set up to enforce slavery and control the formerly enslaved through [Black codes and vagrancy laws](#) and that is still used as a means to control Black people.

As a former prosecutor in Washington, DC, who spent more than a decade trying to make a difference from the inside, I have had to come to terms with the harm I caused. Even with the best of intentions, I worked in a system in which nearly 90 percent of the people cycling through are Black. I have shed more than a few tears in recent years as I learned more about how the legal system I served in as a sworn officer was the tool that allowed slavery to evolve, [as Bryan Stevenson describes](#), to the current mass incarceration of disproportionately Black and brown people. I am blessed to now work each day with prosecutors to do the hard work of change. It is on all of us, but especially those who work in this system, to envision and implement a radically different approach.

Repairing these harms will not be achieved with a few changes in policy and practice. It will require a fundamental unlearning of who and what we consider to be criminal. It will require a new way of responding to harm that focuses on healing, repair, and accountability—a focus that is wholly absent from our current system. And it will require all system actors—prosecutors, judges, court officers, law enforcement, and others—to reckon in a deeply personal way with the harm that the current system causes, and radically rethink what justice looks like in our country.

Among the many painful images of the last few weeks, there have been some glimmers of hope. Nationwide protests have already yielded change. We have seen [city governments commit to defunding their police departments and reinvest in Black communities](#). We have witnessed [legislators push for sweeping reforms](#) banning chokehold restraints and repealing ordinances like New York's 50-a, which shields police disciplinary records from public view—a small step toward meaningful systemic change. This foundation of hope will be needed for the hard work of learning and unlearning, healing, and building a new vision.

We must collectively work to elevate the voices and needs of those who have been directly impacted by our current system and invest in solutions that build on the hope and resilience in our communities—including schools, housing, job training and creation, and mental health and substance use treatment programs.

We must stop rubber stamping unwarranted police stops, racial profiling, and other harmful law enforcement encounters. We must implement restorative practices and other alternatives to incarceration. We must defund a system that perpetuates harm and instead shift investment to community solutions that work. And we must learn about the history that brought us here if we expect to stop repeating it.

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