

Voices of protest

People from across the country are showing up to protest George Floyd's death. We talked to protesters about why this movement matters to them.



By **Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn, Marian Liu, Rachel Hatzipanagos** and **Linah Mohammad**

June 4, 2020

About US is an initiative by The Washington Post to explore issues of identity in the United States. Sign up for the newsletter.

The shocking video of George Floyd under the knee of a Minneapolis police officer has propelled tens of thousands of protesters into the streets nationwide. Undaunted by the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, they marched, locked arms during vigils and held die-ins, bringing traffic to a halt, at times facing tear gas and rubber bullets as they clashed with police officers. From veterans of the civil rights movement to college students protesting for the first time, many say they were moved to take part because this moment feels different.

[Have you participated in protests following George Floyd's death? Share your experience with The Post.]

The Washington Post reached out to readers to ask them why they participated in the protests and what they hope will come out of it. Here's what they had to say.



(Courtesy of Xavier Brown)



(Courtesy of Akil Riley)

'I wanted to show the pain that I was feeling'

Xavier Brown and Akil Riley, 19, Oakland

"As a black man who's affected by this, the real root of it was just pain at the end of the day," said Riley, a freshman at Howard University.

At recent protests, Riley said he has been hit repeatedly with rounds of tear gas by police who "looked ready to hurt somebody." In the past, he's also been harassed while being pulled over, and he said he had a cousin wrongfully sent to jail.

Riley and Brown organized a march in their hometown of Oakland, sending the word out to friends and community organizations on social media. The event drew an estimated 15,000 people this past Monday.



the real root of it was just pain at the end of the day."

[Listen to Akil \(0:16\)](#)

“We were just trying to inspire other youth that anyone can organize, anyone can protest, so to begin a revolution in your own way,” said Brown, a freshman at the University of California at Los Angeles. “I hope America wakes up and really knows how broken their system is ... I hope that white people stop being blind to our cause. I hate it when white people are not only blind to their own privilege, but blind that other people in this country are routinely oppressed. ... And lastly, I just hope that it shows that the black community will never give up what they believe in.”



(Courtesy of Emily Boa)

‘If we stopped protesting because we’re scared ... they win’

Emily Boa, 18, Kensington, Md.

“I’ve been going to D.C. the past couple days because I was just shocked by what happened to George Floyd. I want to be there in solidarity for the communities that are being affected and to protect them because I’m not nearly as threatened as they are by the police,” says Boa, who notes that as a white woman, she can serve as a barrier to others.

“When it gets closer to curfew and the police start approaching us, all the white people try to get in the front and link arms, because when black people have been in the front of protests, they get beat and shot. We feel like they won’t do that to white people as much. And honestly I’d rather it be me than another black person.”

On Monday, Boa was part of a group of protesters at the White House who were tear gassed by federal law enforcement. One of her friends was hit by a rubber bullet in the neck. Another was hit in the cheek. She says the crowd dispersed within minutes.

“It was empowering to stand up for something, but when the police did all that, I’m only getting angrier,” says Boa. She plans to keep heading to Washington to take part in the protests. “We’re protesting the police, and if we stopped protesting because we’re scared of them, they win.”



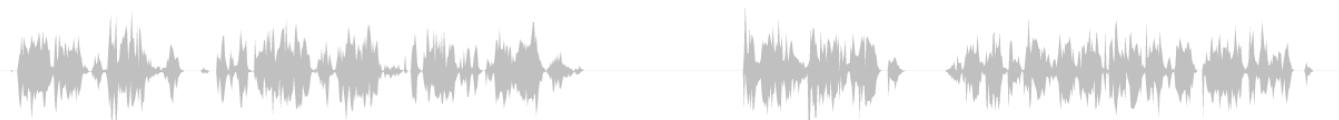
(Courtesy of Robin Williams)

'I'm tired of the racism'

Robin Williams, 63, Ann Arbor, Mich.

Williams remembers nearly being shot by a National Guard member when she peeked out of her window at the riots raging in her Detroit neighborhood in 1967. She was 10 years old. The 12th Street Riot, set off after police raided an after-hours club in a black neighborhood, lasted for five days and left 43 people dead. She saw her next-door neighbor shot and killed by police.

"I've been traumatized for my life because of that," Williams said. "My PTSD is like ... oh it feels like I'm living it all over."



[Listen to Robin \(0:14\)](#)

But a few things have changed since she witnessed the turmoil in the '60s. For one, the crowd at the protest she attended in Ann Arbor also included a coalition of different races, all demanding change.

"You have a diverse crowd," Williams said. "It's not just them attacking us. ... The young people, they care about their friends. We didn't have anybody to care about us."



(Courtesy of Eun Hye Kim)

'I protested to tell police it's not right to kill people'

Khalil Kim Allen, 7, and Eun Hye Kim, 43, Oakland

Eun Hye Kim is a veteran of protests, and this time she decided to bring her son along for a socially distanced car caravan in Oakland. Thousands of vehicles drove through the city for several hours.

"I protested to tell police it's not right to kill people," said Khalil Kim Allen, 7.

It became a part of his daily lesson about the nation's troubled racial history.

"We started it early in the context of his own ancestors, which spanned almost every continent except Australia, so then he understands who he is and his history," Kim, an acupuncturist, said about her son, who is Korean, white, black, Mexican and Native American.

"It's something that we have to talk about every day because it just continually comes up in the news and in our lives. Yeah, I mean, we talked about the legacy of slavery in the United States, genocide. It's complicated because he is a descendant of people who also were a part of enslaving Africans."



(Courtesy of Adriana Allen)

'I never met George Floyd or Breonna Taylor, but I felt that grief. I felt it down to my bones.'

Adriana Allen, 27, Brooklyn, N.Y.

Allen couldn't quite understand why she felt such intense grief for people she had never met. She tried sharing her feelings on social media but found "there's only so much that you can really kind of express and get out through posting things and liking things."

So she went to a protest in Brooklyn. "It was extremely important to me to be around other people that were feeling the kind of pain that I was," she said. While this is not her first protest, she said she feels that this moment is different.

"There are people in my life that were silent in the past," Allen said. "They didn't acknowledge it. They didn't acknowledge that I was hurting because of it. And this is the first time that those same people are reaching out to me and they're asking me what can they do."



(Courtesy of Cameron PajYeeb Yang)

‘Our bodies are less likely to be killed or hurt by police when in police custody’

Cameron PajYeeb Yang, 25, Minneapolis

“Being a queer, trans individual, I think it’s super important for me to be out there protesting and really putting my body on the line,” said Yang, who works for the Coalition of Asian American Leaders, a social justice network of over 3,000 Asian Minnesotans. “Because my queer, trans liberation is really tied to black and brown liberation and their justice, and really all of our histories are tied together and all of our liberation is tied together.”

As Asian protesters, “our bodies are less likely to be killed or hurt by police when in police custody, ensuring that black and brown protesters are not the ones being painfully inflicted by the police,” Yang said.

“Having participated in several protests since last week, there was a lot of unity. The protests were very diverse, with people coming out that really believe in justice for George Floyd, but also in transforming the systems,” said Yang, a second-generation Hmong American. “It does feel like this is really a transformative and historical moment.”



(Courtesy of Nevada Littlewolf)

‘This is my community’

Nevada Littlewolf, 43, Minneapolis

“Our community knows what that violence feels like,” said Littlewolf, who is Anishinaabe Ojibwe, a citizen of the Leech Lake Nation, and political director of the nonprofit Women Winning. “What we have to do is we have to stand together because none of this is going to stop.”

As a longtime activist, Littlewolf has participated in protests since she was a teenager. She was at Standing Rock in South Dakota in 2016 and at the Women’s March in Washington, D.C., in 2017. But this time felt different, because it was at home.



[Listen to Nevada \(0:10\)](#)

“While we’re being traumatized this week, after seeing a community member murdered at the hands of people who are supposed to protect us and serve us, we also see our community destroyed,” said Littlewolf, who lives two miles away from where George Floyd was killed.

“This is my community. This is where I live. This is where I shop. This is where I do business,” she said. “It’s hard, sad and hurts to see our neighborhood burned down and destroyed, but if this is what it takes to get justice, this is what it takes. The majority of damage was caused by outsiders, not community members. I don’t blame community members who are in pain. We need change. We need justice.”

'I thought, looking down at those people ... Can they actually change?'

Cedric Caschetta, 20, Lowell, Ind.

Caschetta had some reservations about going to a protest opposing police violence in the nearby town of Crown Point on Monday. In his corner of Indiana, he was known as the black kid in his overwhelmingly white high school. The people of Crown Point don't know him. But, he said, it turned out to be a "beautiful decision."

"I loved being a part of it, sharing love and grace to all those people that wanted to show support to a message."

As he and his friends walked to the parking lot afterward, a police officer warned them that a group of people with weapons were standing on the side of the road. Caschetta huddled with the other protesters.

▶ 0:32

Demonstrators rallying against police brutality in Lowell, Ind., encountered a group of people holding weapons as they left a protest on June 1. (Bella Gomez)

“We had a little game plan to keep walking, not saying anything to them directly, just keep walking ... Basically we had to make it to the finish line. And we could all go home.”

When he approached a row of people holding firearms, he admitted to being “a little bit” afraid.

“I just tried to keep a straight face as I was walking,” he said, then added, “Well, not a straight face, I was smiling actually ... Because, how I saw it was, if I could be so understanding and forgiving, so could you.”

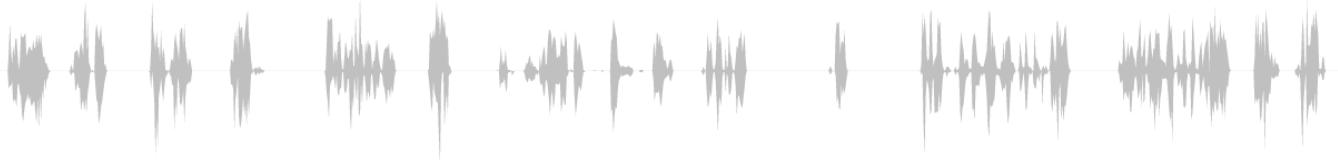


(Courtesy of Anniston Weber)

'I feel like we're in a moment, in a second civil rights movement'

Anniston Weber, 21, Hays, Kan.

Weber saw the large protests forming in Chicago, Washington, Minneapolis and wondered: Why not Hays? She was met with more supporters than she expected, more than 100. The protest experience was mostly positive, and her town of 20,000, about 2 1/2 hours northwest of Wichita, was supportive. But there was a small group of counterprotesters.



[Listen to Anniston \(0:33\)](#)

“There were probably six pickup trucks that were circling us and hurling racial slurs at people that were standing there, flipping us off and saying things like Trump 2020, which has nothing to do with our protest,” Weber said.

For Weber, the negativity reinforced the need for the protest itself.

“It shows that there are people in this town that are openly bigoted, even if we don’t like to admit it.”



(Courtesy of Frederick Joseph)

‘We are on the verge of change’

Frederick Joseph, 31, New York

Joseph’s first encounter with law enforcement was at 12, when he says security guards threw him to the ground when he attempted to return some candy his friends had stolen. As a college student he recalls being stopped and frisked while walking home. The police demanded his backpack, dumped its contents out and broke his laptop, he says.

He's since been involved in multiple demonstrations, even traveling to Ferguson to protest after Michael Brown was killed in 2014.



[Listen to Frederick \(0:28\)](#)

“Being black in 2020 is an amalgamation of all of the oppressive forces that we’ve been talking about happening at one time,” said Joseph, who cited unequal education, health care, wealth gaps and police violence. “But I do think that we are on the verge of change. ... There were much more white people. And one chant in particular I’ve never heard before was ‘White silence is violence.’ That’s a brand new one I’ve never heard in my entire life. But I think it was a testament to white people waking up and being activated to the fact that, the very nature of the systems in America are disproportionately impacting and destroying black and brown lives.”



(Courtesy of Zach Rosenberg)

'I feel like this is the tipping point'

Zach Rosenberg, 36, Washington, D.C.

"I walked from Howard University down to the White House on Sunday and I took part in the protest at the White House [on Monday]. I participated because I was angry. I was angry at the police militarization and particularly its use on racial minorities," says Rosenberg, an editor at an aviation magazine.

Rosenberg says he was encouraged by the diversity of the crowd, and especially the young people he saw.

"I don't think the law-and-order conservatives that traditionally decry such movements really grasp the demographic wave that will soon wash over them. The crowd skewed heavily young, multicolored and multicultural, and there was real anger in the air."

"I feel like this is the tipping point. This is something that's been an issue since the country began and certainly since the 1960s. I hope these protests continue over days, weeks, months. This has been going on for too long, and this may finally be the critical mass that's really going to lead to police reform, less police brutality and to greater cooperation between police forces and citizens."



(Lu Young)

‘We have to care about the worst among us, not just the best among us’

Ed Fletcher, 46, Sacramento

“At first, I didn’t want to go because it seemed crazy to protest during a pandemic. But the more it sat with me, the more I needed to at least be out there a little bit and maybe show what was happening.”

Growing up in Orangevale, the “Idaho of Sacramento County,” Fletcher’s friends were primarily white, and he struggled with feeling “black enough.” His parents are from the South, Arkansas and Louisiana. He also lived in Sweden for a year as an exchange student, went to a historically black college and was a fan of the Burning Man festival, which is “not known for being particularly diverse.”

Going to protests and explaining what they meant over Facebook helped Fletcher open discussions on race with his white friends.

“If you’re black and have a lot of white friends, you probably realize you’ve got some racist friends in your midst, or some prejudiced friends, or some friends that are okay with one level of black, but not the totality,” said Fletcher, a documentary filmmaker. “We have to care about the worst among us, not just the best among us.”



(Courtesy of Samer Owaida)

‘Liberation for all oppressed nationalities’

Samer Owaida, 23, Chicago

Growing up during the second intifada, Samer Owaida says he knows what injustice looks like first hand.

His earliest memory is when he was 4 years old and an Israeli army tank rolled through the city of Ramallah. Around the same time, he says, Israeli forces killed one of his family members.

“Growing up under occupation,” Samer said, “the one thing that is just on my mind is, as cheesy as it sounds, is liberation. Liberation for my people, liberation for black people, liberation for all oppressed nationalities. I have studied this stuff in and out, and I know the military deals these countries have with each other. I know the exchange programs they have with each other.”



[Listen to Samer \(0:31\)](#)

He says he sees the state violence of Israel against Palestinians as not just similar to the oppression of black communities in the United States. The two are deeply interconnected, he says. That’s why Samer has been at the forefront of every Black Lives Matter protest in Chicago.

“As Palestinians,” he said, “we are in solidarity with all oppressed nationalities, and we are against white supremacy and all the insidious ways that it manifests, whether it’s through electoral politics or the police murdering of black and brown bodies.”



(Courtesy of Karen Wohlleben)

‘Even with covid-19, I felt like I had to be there’

Karen Wohlleben, 56, Minneapolis

“I was protesting on Tuesday, May, 26th, the first evening. It was a very diverse crowd in every way, age, race, background, families. There were no police protecting the intersections or helping us in any way. It felt very organic, like the community feeling very strongly about what had happened to Mr. Floyd and stepping out on their doorsteps to show their support and their frustration.”

“One of the things I’ve always done in my life is, is shown up for protests and added my voice. Even with covid-19 and everyone trying to stay at home, I just felt like I had to be there,” she says. “I also felt like as an older white woman, I knew I could go there and be allowed to do whatever I needed to do.”

Wohlleben, a real estate agent, got sick over the weekend, so she is getting a coronavirus test and isolating herself for the time being. She plans to watch the protests from her balcony and wave in support.

“Once I’m well, I don’t know if the protests are going to keep going. But what I will most likely do is make sure that the organizations that are bringing young and diverse people into the political system have my support, so that they can decide what their world needs to be going forward.”

[Have you participated in protests following George Floyd’s death? Share your experience with The Post.]

About this story

The Post heard from readers through an audience callout, social media, and other reporting. Editing by Vanessa Williams. Audio editing by Linah Mohammad. Copy editing by Nora Simon. Design and development by Junne Alcantara. Photos were provided by the people interviewed for this story.

Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn

Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn is the community editor at The Washington Post, with a focus on comments, live chats and reader submissions. She comes to The Post from Mother Jones, where she was the assistant editor for audience and breaking news. Follow [Twitter](#)

Marian Liu

Marian Liu is an Operations Editor for The Washington Post. Follow [Twitter](#)

Rachel Hatzipanagos

Rachel Hatzipanagos is a multiplatform editor at The Washington Post. She previously worked at Trove, Patch and the South Florida Sun Sentinel. Follow [Twitter](#)

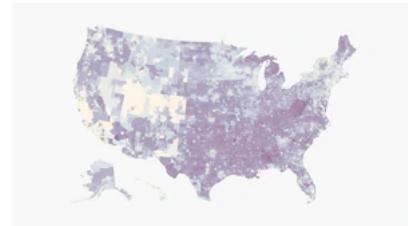
Linah Mohammad

Linah Mohammad works on "Post Reports," The Washington Post's daily podcast. She previously worked at NPR's All Things Considered and Morning Edition. Follow [Twitter](#)

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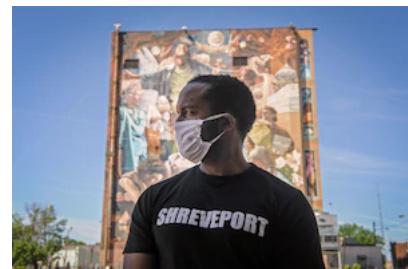
How covid-19 thrives in vulnerable communities of color

To create a map of which communities could be more vulnerable to covid-19, The Washington Post analyzed chronic health and social vulnerability estimates.



How cities lost precious time to protect African American residents from coronavirus

The slow release of statistics on the virus's effect based on race was an early flare that the response to the disease would follow familiar racial lines.



The death of George Floyd: What video and other records show about his final minutes

The Washington Post reconstructed the events immediately preceding the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis using security footage, emergency services recordings and cellphone videos.



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**indayz** 1 month ago

The video of George Floyd pinned down by police officers seemingly untroubled by Floyd saying he can't breathe is already troubling. Then he cries for his mother - sohso more so as these were his last moments. I cry as others do for the dehumanization of George Floyd and others. God have mercy on the US.

[Like](#) 1 [Link](#) [Report](#) **zapfilms** 1 month ago

Thanks and please continue with this WaPo. I have been watching worldwide videos - for the young woman from a small place in Kansas check this out from Chéticamp, Cape Breton Island Nova Scotia <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wp9Lb0IX1XU>

[Like](#) 1 [Link](#) [Report](#) **Justice Is Served** 1 month ago

This is not just about any one person. We're not mourning in outrage just the murder of a single individual.

We are rising up to protest the murder of all of our brighter futures, the

destruction of our better angels, the loss of the brilliant society we might have built together and become, had we not spent the last four years in the cesspool of one man's vulgarity, incessant racism, and unrelenting incitement of hateful violence against minorities.

We have all lost an irreplaceable part of our better selves because of what we've had to endure and bear witness to for so long, powerless to stop it or reverse it.

What is in the air now that animates us to stand up together where before there was no one, to raise our voices in a roar of protest where no voice was heard before, is OUR RESOLVE. We have had enough. We are DONE WITH THIS.

Like  4 Link ↬ Report 



dtmbretire 4 weeks ago

Do you cry that 90 percent of African Americans are killed by other African Americans? Many of those African Americans (and whites) killed by cops had extensive criminal records

Like  Link ↬ Report 



Prosperity for the Poor 1 month ago

When will the Church of Scientology finally apologize to People of Color?

Like  Link ↬ Report 



AliceInBoulderland 1 month ago

This is excellent - keep showing the profiles of all those 'really scary' citizens out protesting in their tank tops, sandals, grey hair, and sun dresses. trump thinks the military will be firing upon their own relatives in the streets?

Like  2 Link ↬ Report 



blue lakes 1 month ago

CNN: NFL Roger Goodell apologizes: NFL was "WRONG" for not listening to players concerns without black players there would be no NFL we are listening I am listening and I will be reaching out to players.

Like  Link ↗ Report 



PksSri 1 month ago

What he didn't say was that: profit above all else.

Like  Link ↗ Report 



Adam Moswen 1 month ago (Edited)

With the exception of what appears to be the police murder of George Floyd, I was curious about the number unarmed police shooting fatalities for males in Minneapolis.

This is what I found from the WaPo police shooting website for the entire state of Minnesota between 2015 when the database began to present day 2020.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/>

A total of 5 unarmed males were killed, 4 of them white and ONE was black. That incident involved Jamal Clark.

The Jamal Clark shooting drew lots of media coverage. In response to the shooting, Black Lives Matter organized protests outside the Fourth Precinct police station that lasted for 18 days, as well as other protests and demonstrations in and around Minneapolis.

Based on officers' testimony, some witness statements and forensic evidence it was determined that Clark was not handcuffed at the time of the shooting and the evidence supports the officers' account that Clark grabbed one of their guns. So this was determined to be a justified shooting

Can anyone name any of the FOUR unarmed white males person killed by police in Minnesota?

Like  1 Link ↗ Report 

**ChristmasRose** 1 month ago

Oh well (with an H in front), Minneapolis police even shoot unarmed white females who called 911 in the first place to report a crime.

Like 1 Link ↬ Report

**Adam Moswen** 1 month ago

Bingo, but do you remember her name? The shooting actually got a fair amount of press.

Like 1 Link ↬ Report

**ChristmasRose** 1 month ago

Justine from Australia.

Like 1 Link ↬ Report

**dtmbretire** 4 weeks ago

WaPo and BLM do not care about white males killed by police! It does not fit their agenda.

Like 1 Link ↬ Report

**ChristmasRose** 1 month ago

Xavier Brown has the most infectious laugh I've seen in a long time. Xavier, my wish is for you to keep it up throughout your entire life.

That would mean there's truly been an end to racism as we unfortunately know it today.

Like 1 Link ↬ Report

**Bill7547** 1 month ago

Just watch a British Black comedian complaining about racism in Britain. French, during the '30's welcomed Blacks and now would like to rid the Country of them. Canada welcomed Blacks from the Underground Railroad and now

regret it. Is there a place in the World Blacks are welcomed? Not even in Africa. However, Black Asian Indians are welcome in this Country. Asian for the most part are respected in this Country. Is there a place in the World that Black are welcomed. Is there a place in the World that a Black has a better chance to make it than this Country. NO! WHY?????????????????????

Like Link ↬ Report



LillyV 1 month ago

Do you have a point in that ultra racist rant?

Like 1 Link ↬ Report



Bill7547 1 month ago

I'm sorry, it is not PC correct to state FACT?

Like 1 Link ↬ Report



pch101 1 month ago *(Edited)*

"Even with covid-19 and everyone trying to stay at home, I just felt like I had to be there"

She means well, but this is going to end up killing a lot of people.

I was mocking the anti-lockdown knuckleheads. But these protests are much, much larger and more geographically dispersed.

Superspreading is a certainty. And no, the virus doesn't really care about whether you have a good cause or are a nice person.

Like 2 Link ↬ Report

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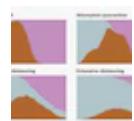
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