

The Issue is Fear

Q: The news is full of stories about men of color being injured and killed by the police. Is it racism? What is the solution?

A: There is a great deal of energized discussion on this topic, and rightfully so. Unfortunately there has been a relative absence of productive dialog regarding solutions. Let's talk about solutions. But first, let's agree on the root cause of the problem.

Up to now, what our communities of color and our law enforcement establishment have failed to recognize and address is that when black men and law enforcement interact, from the very outset there is a heightened level of fear on the part of both parties. At the same time there is a lack of recognition on the part of the both parties that the other is operating from that heightened fear perspective. Hold on—just leave that “R” word in your pocket for a minute.

If we can teach our police and our black men that this is happening, and teach skills in fear reduction (in law enforcement they are beginning to teach a related set of skills called “de-escalation techniques”) we can make major progress in reducing the number of people killed by police.

When we get caught up in the discussion of “Is it racism?” we distract ourselves from what's truly important, which is how do we increase the safety of all involved in that interaction between law enforcement and members of the community?

American society in general have been socialized to fear the power of black men. Are they willing to adhere to social norms and our expectations? Are they prone to violence? It's not just white women who clutch their purse a little tighter when they find themselves in close quarters with a black stranger. Black women do it too!

While I personally believe that a systemic undervaluation of black lives also contributes to the high number of black deaths in police custody, I don't think boiling it down and blaming it on “racism” is helpful, and here's why. As soon as that word enters the mix, 90% of all police officers will think “well I'm not racist, so this doesn't apply to me” and you won't change behavior. But cops can relate to the idea that when they encounter a black male “suspect” that their pulse goes up a bit, and that in response they may operate with greater caution, compared to encounter with other demographics. That isn't racism, per se. It's fear.

At the same time cops are not attuned to the level of fear operating in our young men. Many if not most of our young men are aware of the long history (recently with much greater visibility) of cops humiliating, injuring, and killing black men. Police officers are trained to control a situation. Anyone not immediately compliant to that control is seen as a threat. It can be hard to be compliant when you're afraid of injury or death. Fear (now I'm speaking of the suspect's fear) clouds judgment. You might talk back. You might

run. You might pull out your cell phone to video the encounter or call your mom and get shot because the cop thought you were reaching for a weapon.

I want to take a moment to address those who would say the problem of black deaths in police custody can be addressed solely by improving black people's level of compliance when interacting with the police. The lessons of John Crawford (young man in a Beavercreek Ohio Walmart; holding a Walmart airsoft rifle, mistaken for an assault weapon; killed by police while complying with instructions to put down the rifle) and Tamir Rice (boy in a Cleveland public park holding a toy rifle mistaken for an assault weapon, killed by police within 2 seconds of their arrival on the scene without warning) aside, I completely agree that it is smart and reasonable that we continue to teach our children and our young men and women to be compliant to law enforcement direction, and to remind them that the consequences of conflict with law enforcement can be fatal. But in addition, I think we need to teach our children (and our young men) de-escalation techniques, and help them understand that the cop bearing down on them is actually acting as much out of fear as anything else. It's not intuitive that a man wearing a badge, a gun and a bulletproof vest should be afraid of an unarmed teenager, yet we can help our young people survive their encounters with police by helping them recognize that, rightly or wrongly, that officer armed with a badge and a gun is as afraid of us as we are of them.

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For more information on facilitated community and law enforcement collaboration, and improving community safety through empathic awareness and fear reduction training, contact us at bwoodson@forwardmotion.biz