

# USA: Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?

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**Five years since its inception, a look at what the Black Lives Matter movement accomplished and the important work it left unfinished.**

The autopsy report confirmed what her neighbors said happened in an apartment complex outside of Houston, Texas. Pamela Turner, a forty-four-year-old grandmother of three, was on the ground, trying to connect with the humanity of the police officer who stood over her by screaming that she was pregnant.

Officer Juan Delacruz ignored her pleas, stepped back, unholstered his gun, and shot five times. Three of his bullets ripped through Turner's body, ending her life. One entered her left cheek, shattering her face. Another tore through her left chest, and the last, her abdomen. The medical examiner ruled it a homicide.

What happened next had been rehearsed many times before. The police put Delacruz on a mandatory three-day administrative (paid) leave; the family secured the services of civil rights attorney Benjamin Crump; the Reverend Al Sharpton delivered the eulogy; and a well-organized and well-attended demonstration forced the police to extend their comments beyond the typical talking points.

In the five years since Mike Brown Jr was murdered and the streets of Ferguson, Missouri erupted, police across the United States have killed more than four thousand people, a quarter of them African American. Five years later, do Black Lives Matter? Confronted by an array of internal and external obstacles, "the movement" has stalled even as a white supremacist rules from the White House.

Mike Brown's murder and the uprising it inspired cracked open a period of organizing and protest that boldly aimed to end the reign of police terror in black poor and working-class communities around the country. For those who think that kind of language is hyperbole, consider the conclusions reached by a 2016 Chicago police commission convened by former mayor Rahm Emanuel after the vicious murder of Black teenager Laquan McDonald by Chicago police officer Jason Van Dyke:

[That outrage](#) [about the killing of Laquan McDonald] exposed deep and longstanding fault lines between black and Latino communities on the one hand and the police on the other arising from police shootings to be sure, but also about daily, pervasive transgressions that prevent people of all ages, races, ethnicities and gender across Chicago from having basic freedom of movement in their own neighborhoods. Stopped without justification, verbally and physically abused, and in some instances arrested, and then detained without counsel . . . *CPD's own data gives validity to the widely held belief the police have no regard for the sanctity of life when it comes to people of color.*

The report itself was evidence of the tremendous pressure generated by movement activists with a

Democratic president in office, on the eve of a historic election. Black voters had made Obama president, and the party needed to at least project the appearance of progress.

## **The Emergence of a Movement**

By Obama's second term, what began as a local movement in Ferguson had erupted into a much broader national force. A grand jury's failure to indict the officer who killed Mike Brown Jr in Ferguson was followed by the failure of a grand jury to indict a New York cop, Daniel Pantaleo, despite video of him choking Eric Garner to death on the streets of Staten Island. In a stupor of rage and disbelief, with hopes shattered like broken glass, the experiences of police abuse and intimidation united young black people around the country.

The watersheds of Ferguson, Cleveland, Los Angeles, Staten Island, and countless others fed the stream that became Black Lives Matter (BLM) in the late fall and early winter of 2014 and 2015. In December 2014, tens of thousands of people across the country participated in acts of nonviolent civil disobedience. On December 13, 2014, fifty thousand people marched through the streets of New York with chants that connected Ferguson, Missouri, to New York City and then to the nation: "Hands up, don't shoot," "I can't breathe," "Black Lives Matter." There were protests across the nation, in cities large and small. These scattered demonstrations cohered through the chant, demand, and declaration of "Black Lives Matter," in ways similar to the cry of "freedom now" during the civil rights movement.

Even as the professional punditry declared the movement dead after the predictable backlash of police unions and political conservatives, the Baltimore spring spilled into the streets, carried forward by black children exhausted from the institutional neglect and raw racism that lies beneath lead poisoning, poverty, and charter schools. Measured by the number of formal organizations it sprouted, the movement was barely ever alive, but it thrived in the hearts and minds of young black people who ached to be heard and seen.

But no movement continues simply because its cause is righteous. Its rise or fall is ultimately determined by a tricky calculus involving strategy, tactics, politics, moves, and countermoves. The Black Lives Matter movement always faced two external challenges, not including the internal struggles that every movement wrestles with. Externally, the movement had to endure the way that its mere existence became a rallying point around which various strands of the white-supremacist right could consolidate. For the most visible activists, that meant dealing with credible death threats along with the more typical deluge of harassment.

Early on as a candidate, Trump made [BLM his enemy](#), describing activists as [terrorists](#) and pledging his unwavering support to police. And the FBI, true to its history, began surveilling black activists and inventing new political categories along the way to communicate the new hazard: "[black identity extremists](#)." It wasn't surprising, but it was exhausting, and it could be scary. When Trump decided to make BLM the foil of his white-supremacist candidacy by making naked "law-and-order" appeals and aligning his campaign to the "blue lives matter" hysteria, it put activists and organizations in the crosshairs.

But it was even trickier to navigate the maneuvers of the Democratic Party establishment in its efforts to divide the movement between the pragmatists and those who were rapidly radicalizing in the face of intransigent police power. The Obama administration had a virtual "open door" policy when it came to activists. Their strategy was to make busyness and constant engagement look like progress. This meant having regular contact with activists, empaneling a national policing commission, and empowering the Department of Justice to initiate investigations and compile reports on egregious police departments. And yet, throughout this flurry of activity, it was hard to

grasp what was changing. Where was the impact?

The Democratic Party sought, with some urgency, to resolve these issues so that progressives could then turn their full attention to the 2016 election. This meant that the liberal establishment constantly questioned the motives, structure, and demands of the movement in hopes of moving things along. “Who are your leaders?” “What are your demands?” “Give us a solution!” were some of the questions — or rather accusations — directed at the most visible leaders of the movement.

### **Dinner With the President**

This style reflected the influence of nongovernmental organizations, which measure the effectiveness of activism or organizing through a lens of efficiency and tangible results. There was pressure to come up with solutions or policy initiatives as a more “real” and measurable way to confront the issues with policing. When some activists chafed at this particular framing, they were attacked as purists.

For example, when a black activist from Chicago named Aislinn Pulley refused to go to a closed-door meeting at the White House in February of 2016 because she doubted the sincerity of the Obama administration, President Barack Obama personally called her out.

[Obama said](#), “You can’t just keep on yelling at them and you can’t refuse to meet because that might compromise the purity of your position . . . The value of social movements and activism is to get you at the table, get you in the room and then start trying to figure out how is this problem going to be solved. You then have a responsibility to prepare an agenda that is achievable — that can institutionalize the changes you seek and to engage the other side.”

The president’s comments did have a hearing in some parts of the movement. The Black Lives Matter movement was not uniform in its thinking, strategies, or tactics. And those divergent ideas about political objectives and the process through which the movement should arrive at its decisions were deeply contested within the movement. Some activists welcomed White House access and believed it meant they were getting a hearing at the highest level. Brittany Packnett, who was active in St Louis and Ferguson in 2014, explained why she and others participated in the meeting with Obama:

To gain the liberation we seek, there remain many critical moments for action and we are wise not to limit the legitimate ones. Our fights will never be won at the policy table alone. Protestors assume risk, build organic democratic accountability in the streets and force organized tactics to take hold. Organizers mobilize the people with strategic and direct action to push systemic change in institutions and policies. Policymakers and institutional leaders are influenced by all manner of people continuing to mount pressure in every space possible to see lasting change . . . I believe this movement’s collective, varied work can and has moved mountains but it will take every one of us and every tactic at our disposal to win the freedom we seek.

For others, there were misgivings. Aislinn Pulley, the Chicago activist that Obama chastised for refusing to meet, had a vastly different vision of change compared to the one offered by the president. She wrote an [open letter in response to](#) his criticism of her:

I could not, with any integrity, participate in such a sham that would only serve to legitimize the false narrative that the government is working to end police brutality and the institutional racism that fuels it. For the increasing number of families fighting for justice and dignity for their kin slain by police, I refuse to give its perpetrators and

enablers political cover by making an appearance among them . . . We assert that true revolutionary and systemic change will ultimately only be brought forth by ordinary working people, students and youth — organizing, marching and taking power from the corrupt elites.

These kinds of tensions and debates in political movements were, of course, not new, especially in the black movement. In 1964, movement strategist Bayard Rustin argued that the civil rights movement and new forms of black militancy must be prepared to shift “from protest to politics.” He argued that, “it is clear that Negro needs cannot be satisfied unless we go beyond what has so far been placed on the agenda. How are these radical objectives to be achieved? The answer is simple, deceptively so: *through political power* . . . We are challenged now to broaden our social vision, to develop functional programs with concrete objectives.”

Rustin was suggesting that the shift into formal politics marked a sign of political maturity and could deliver much more substantive change to black communities than protest alone. He had in mind an expansive social-democratic program pursued by a fresh wave of politicians. (There were barely a hundred black elected officials in 1964.) We got the politicians (ten years after Rustin’s call, there were several hundred black elected officials) — culminating in the 2008 election of Barack Obama — but not the welfare state.

Obama’s public scolding was not precisely over the question of “electoral politics,” but you can hear echoes of (a narrowed version of) Rustin’s message. Obama was declaring that in 2016, it was time to stop “yelling” and offer pragmatic solutions that could be acted upon. His response revealed his own impatience with the continuation of Black Lives Matter, now threatening to cause a distraction from the coming general election in 2016. But, more important, his personal intervention was also intended to divide the movement between the “doers” and the “dreamers.”

For many activists, the maddening web of police violence and the wider criminal justice system — the fine and fee structure, expensive bail, and the arbitrariness of sentencing — required more than roundtables and reports. Many were reaching for structural rather than superficial changes to federal, state, and local criminal justice systems. Some were embracing the politics of abolition and the belief that society would be better off without the entire carceral paradigm. Instead of spending \$80 billion a year to put human beings in cages, maybe those resources could be redistributed in such a way as to make people’s lives better instead of being used to punish.

In this way, Obama’s scold and Pulley’s response revealed more than strategic loggerheads on the objective of social movements. Of the many problems in US society Black Lives Matter has exposed, the sharp division within black politics stands out. The political rancor partly reflected a generational divide, but it also showed a schism between the class anger of black workers and the class optimism of a tiny black elite.

Some activists chafed at the paternalism of Obama, who was quick to remind the (mostly white) US public that he was not “Black America’s president” while simultaneously code-switching into Ebonics to chastise African Americans to get “Uncle Pookie” off the couch to go and vote.

But it wasn’t just Obama. His race antics were a bitter reminder of the ways that black elected officials often fattened themselves up munching at the trough of black votes, only to [deliver little](#) other than themselves alone as tokens of alleged racial progress. But the reality was that in many cities, black mayors, black city council people, black police chiefs, and police officers oversaw the inequality and oppression that fueled Black Lives Matter.

The naked racism of Donald Trump’s description of Baltimore as a “rodent infested” den where “no

human being wants to live” captured the nation’s attention, but a broader truth received less — local and national black elected officials have betrayed their constituents by way of institutional neglect and then have relied on brutal policing to manage the ensuing crisis.

It was this betrayal of promises of “hope” and “change” that rallied the young rebels of Ferguson and then Baltimore, who Obama and Baltimore mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake described as thugs, to act on behalf of millions.

This was the thorny context to Aislinn Pulley’s frustration and her rejection of the invitation to chat with the president of the United States. The point here is not whether Packnett’s decision to meet Obama or Pulley’s declining was more correct than the other. The reality is that all social movements are expressions of the deep desire for change or reform of the current situation.

For Black Lives Matter, that could be expressed as the hope cops would “stop killing us,” but ultimately it was a movement to reform the status quo of policing. But what often happens is that through the course of events, the movement participants come to radically different conclusions about what the objective should be. For many BLM activists, their conclusion began to be that the police could not actually be reformed. This then put them into conflict with the reform nature of the movement itself.

### **The Tyranny of Structurelessness in the Age of Social Media**

However, the bigger problem was the movement’s inability to create the space to debate and work out the tension between reform and revolution, or more crudely between body cameras and prison abolition. All movements are confronted with existential debates concerning their viability and longevity. There are always crucial decisions to be made concerning their direction and the best route to get there. But without the opportunity to collectively assess, discuss, or ponder what the movement is or should be, those political disagreements can sometimes devolve into bitter personal attacks.

Among movement activists, acrimonious personal disputes were expressed throughout the social media landscape, creating an archival trove of material for state agents. It also fueled animosity and discord between people who had every interest in collaboration and solidarity. Callout culture summoned attention to every transgression, armed with the belief that the act was committed with the worst of intentions. The goodwill that many imagined and wanted to rest at the heart of the movement could only be built upon trust and genuine relationships. These were difficult to build without formal structures, clear responsibilities, and mechanisms for leadership and accountability.

Indeed, the “organic democratic accountability” that Packnett insisted on was absent. The lack of clear entry points into movement organizing, and the absence of any democratically accountable organization or structure within the movement, left very few spaces to evaluate the state of the movement, delaying its ability to pivot and postponing the generalization of strategic lessons and tactics from one locality to the next or from one action to the next. Instead, the emphasis on autonomy, even at the cost of disconnection from the broader movement, left each locality to its own devices to learn and conjure its own strategy.

The BLM movement claimed to have no leaders, embracing the “horizontalism” of its Occupy predecessor. But all movements have leaders; someone or some group of individuals are deciding that this or that thing will or will not happen; someone decides how this or that resource is used or not used; someone decides whether this or that meeting will or will not happen. The issue is not whether there are leaders, it is [whether those leaders are accountable](#) to those they represent. It also matters the way in which those leaders are determined as leaders. In the case of the meeting

with Obama, it appears that the attendees were selected by the Obama administration as individuals or organizations they determined were the leadership of the movement. Perhaps this was unavoidable, but the lack of accountability to the ordinary people who made up the mass of the movement could cause confusion or hard feelings.

But the insistence that there was no leadership even as people are brandished as leaders by the political establishment obscured how decisions were being made and who was to account for them. These problems deepened when it began to feel as if the movement was going in the wrong direction or was stagnant, as it became difficult to determine who to look to for guidance.

This does not mean that “if only” there had been this meeting or that gathering, or even if there had been more democracy in decision-making that the Black Lives Matter movement would have triumphed over police brutality. But it raises the crucial question of how organizers emerge from a lost battle or even a lost war with more clarity about their experience, the lessons learned, and salvaged relationships that may allow them to fight another day with a better sense of what to do the next time around.

### **Between Hillary Clinton and the “Progressive Foundations”**

These tensions within the BLM movement were magnified by the high-profile harassment of activists initiated by Trump’s minions and the ongoing manipulation carried out by Democratic Party operatives. The pressure to propel the movement forward while also remaining engaged with officials for whom engagement was intended to create the appearance of progress generated enormous strain on activists. This tension was exacerbated when the Democratic Party nominated Hillary Clinton as its candidate.

Clinton’s campaign slogan, “America Is Already Great,” was a rejoinder to Trump’s “Make American Great Again.” But it also betrayed a level of political detachment that shocked young black people engaged in a life-and-death struggle, fueling the debate over the best way to advance the struggle. At the same time, activists were sure that if Clinton won, she would be indebted to young black voters, lending credibility to a strategy that focused on policy initiatives that could have been realized within a Clinton administration.

The momentum of the movement began to wane for a variety of reasons; but the outcome was to make the inside political game seem like a more viable way forward. As the persistence of police abuse and killings made the problem seem intractable, the absence of democratic debate and strategy-making led to the de-emphasis of mass marches and mass actions. Instead, the actions got smaller, more secretive, led by small groups of people who were then vulnerable to arrest.

This cycle of smaller, arrestable actions became a self-fulfilling prophecy as many of those activists decried others’ lack of willingness to “sacrifice.” The smallness and marginality of the protests became moral cudgels with which to beat people who were not willing to risk arrest. In this context, engaging the political establishment seemed a more realistic route to get something done — at least to some, certainly not all.

This was even more the case as supposed progressive foundations tied much of their funding to activists’ ability to “get results.” Foundation funding flooded into movement organizations almost immediately after the Ferguson uprising. The money was needed and readily accepted as organizers tried to sustain the momentum generated by the Ferguson uprising and the ensuing demonstrations proliferating across the country as police continued to kill African Americans. But the donations from entities ranging from Google to the Ford Foundation and dozens of others in between came with more than money or funding in mind. They were most obviously trying to connect the inherent



progressive character of social movements to their “brand.”

But in some cases, like the Ford Foundation, the money has [historically come with an effort](#) to then manipulate the objectives and direction of the movement. Ford was notorious in the 1960s for using its vast resources to nudge black radicals toward “community development” and black capitalism, and away from their insurgent potential. [Karen Ferguson](#) has written incisively on the ways that Ford leveraged its financial intervention into the 1960s black movement to promote “responsible” leaders, those it felt could promulgate a political direction with which they agreed.

But this is not just about the Ford Foundation. Megan Ming Francis describes a process of “[movement capture](#)” when recounting how foundation donors in the 1920s and 1930s used the lure of funding to help transform the [NAACP’s political focus](#) on white terrorism and lynching to education, constituting less of a threat to the political status quo.

The influence of foundations remains one of moderation and compromise. The logic is rooted in the reality of these multibillion-dollar organizations that ultimately see themselves as rescuing the system from its excesses.

Consider an article recently published by the president of the Ford Foundation, Darren Walker. In the article, Walker counsels the wisdom [in “nuance” as a rejection of “extreme”](#) political positions. As he artfully suggests,

Extreme opposition seems to have entered the playbook of leaders in every category. In this worldview, it’s all or nothing, good or evil, the best or worst . . . Nuance and complexity, meanwhile, are nowhere to be found. And our *extreme* challenges remain *extremely* unsolved.

Walker describes activists in New York City who have been struggling to close the horrible jail, Rikers Island, as political extremists. Walker was part of a commission that agreed to close Rikers, only to build several smaller jails to replace it. He says it’s a compromise — an example of the kind of nuance to which prison and jail abolitionists appear to be impervious. Walker argues that to reject compromise is to “let the perfect be the enemy of progress. If we skip steps, we risk creating a new kind of gap — a gap of missed opportunities and lost alliances.”

But all of this is subterfuge for his actual intervention:

We can see how our capitalist systems have broken down, *while also* appreciating that markets have helped reduce the number of people around the globe who live in poverty . . . We can be critical of ill-gotten fortunes, *while also* appreciating the current need for private capital to fund certain valuable public goods, and encouraging wealthy individuals to understand their own privilege and support institutional reforms.

Rarely in this world do you get something for nothing. The tens of millions of dollars the Ford Foundation disseminates to organizations and activists of all stripes comes with the intent to redirect or reshape insurgency and disruptions toward more reasonable means. It’s never that obvious, because if it were, it would not be effective. Walker here isn’t just speaking for Ford, but one might consider this to be the objective of most corporations who have the foresight to develop a philanthropic wing as a way to influence the debate over social questions. One of the ways that functions today is with the emphasis placed on policy initiatives and solutions as the practical way to advance a movement or social agenda.

Consider how the Movement for [Black Lives policy platform](#) was heralded in ways that made it seem as important as the marches and mobilizations themselves. To be sure, many of the reforms that the

policy platform called for were far-reaching and, if implemented, could be transformative. But without a social movement on the ground to create the muscle necessary to coerce the political establishment to shift from its intransigence, how would any of it become achievable?

The ascendance of the policy platform and its projection as a crowning achievement of the movement revealed more about the state of the movement than was intended. In ways similar to the wish-list approach to presidential campaigning, it is easy to call for the moon and stars — and sometimes it is necessary to imagine what freedom might look like — but after demands have been delivered and promises have been made, someone has got to fight to make them a reality. The platform could not answer the central question of how to harness the physical power of a social movement to do just that.

The scrum for foundation dollars could have other unintended consequences. The ability to secure funding undermined the potential of developing more democratic practices within the movement by giving those with the access to funding an outsize voice. With more resources came more authority because of the ways it elevated the profile, presence, and voices of some. This dynamic eventually cut into the kind of unity in purpose necessary to confront the challenge of stopping police abuse and murder. Instead, activists were compelled to compete with one another for funding based on their “unique” contribution to the movement.

These observations aren’t intended as some holy screed about how foundation money dirties our movements — though it undoubtedly does. We should stop and ask why corporations that have made billions under US capitalism are so eager to “donate” money to activists, many of whom embrace some version of anticapitalist politics. As I referenced above, foundations’ financial influence has *always*, at least through most of the twentieth century and today, been a factor. We can all conceive of homey and quaint ways of raising money for ourselves, but it is difficult to imagine the large scale of activism needed to confront the problems of our society based on bake sales and social events.

But the availability of that money requires even more democracy within our movements. It means decision-making must extend beyond the staffers or the executive board or whomever is drawing a paycheck to those who make up the ranks of the movement. It means that much of our organizing and activism will be messy, slow, and wrongheaded sometimes, but it might also make it easier for everyone to claim ownership of the movement.

The wider participation of everyone with a stake in a Black Lives Matter movement may have resulted in more contact between the different layers of the movement. With the creation of political spaces where these different layers could more closely engage with and influence each other, there may have been a greater urgency placed on the mass movement and mobilizations. Some have concluded that mass mobilizations are no longer necessary; that people just show up and then go home. Of course, that can be one effect, but we should not underestimate the transformative power in the assembly and collective action required to demonstrate together. It is not only about its influence in policymaking or in governing institutions but also the ways that power manifest itself among those who make up the ranks of the march.

The radical artist and critic John Berger wrote of mass demonstrations:

[Theoretically](#) demonstrations are meant to reveal the strength of popular opinion or feeling: theoretically they are an appeal to the democratic conscience of the State.

In this sense, Berger wrote, the numbers present at a protest are significant not because of their impact on the state, but on those who participate:



The importance of the numbers involved is to be found in the direct experience of those taking part in or sympathetically witnessing the demonstration. For them the numbers cease to be numbers and become the evidence of their senses, the conclusions of their imagination. The larger the demonstration, the more powerful and immediate (visible, audible, tangible) a metaphor it becomes for their total collective strength.

The point is that movements or mobilizations not only create the possibility of changing our material condition by exerting the force of many upon the intransigence of the few. Social movements create arenas where we, ourselves, can be transformed. Mass action breaks us from the isolation of everyday life and turns us into political actors.

In a society that wrongly attributes our successes to our personal ingenuity and blames our failures on personal weakness, the mass movement, that arena of struggle, brings us together to share in our difficulties and show how the solution to so many of our problems is collective. It pierces the prevailing common sense about our society.

In order for us as poor and oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed. This means that we are going to have to learn to think in radical terms. I use the term radical in its original meaning — [getting down to and understanding the root cause](#). It means facing a system that does not lend itself to your needs and devising means by which you change that system.

The collective exhilaration of confrontation and the potential for change opens up the possibility for posing these kinds of questions. Without it, it is hard to break free from the reasonableness and pragmatism as counseled by Obama when he lectured a Chicago activist on the narrow objectives of social movements — to change a law or initiate a policy.

As 2015 and 2016 wore on, no one believed that Trump would win; instead, activists began to focus on ways they could shift a new Clinton administration on police reform. Of course, Trump was elected, and all the plans to move to Washington, DC, to begin the “inside” phase of the movement never materialized. Today, there are few signs of the grassroots Black Lives Matter movement that in its first years captured the imagination and hopes of young black people and beyond.

This certainly does not mean that the movement “failed.” There continue to be many BLM activists organized and engaged in other forms. It is impossible to imagine that the public appetite for criminal justice reform, including bail reform and the slow but steady decriminalization of marijuana, could be happening without the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement. We are all indebted to the movement for bringing to light the full extent to which black women, including black trans women, are also victims of state-sanctioned violence and racist abuse. Many of the organizers who were central to the movement see these new arenas of struggle as a continued expression of the Black Lives Matter movement.

But the mass movement that captured the attention of the world and upended the banal status quo does not exist in the same way. In some ways, that is expected. Nothing stands still, let alone something as alive and dynamic as a social movement. The questions of strategy, tactics, and democracy that emerged as a consequence of the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement have not gone away; in fact, they remain critical to determining how we transform our current situation.

## **Still Fighting for a Future Where Black Lives Matter**

What does the shattered face of Pamela Turner, exploded by a police officer’s bullet, tell us about

the efforts of the Black Lives Matter movement? It tells us how absolutely central policing is to maintaining the racist, sexist, unequal status quo.

Police unions and elected officials like to portray policing as dangerous, as some kind of bizarre last line of defense between “us” and a murky menacing criminal element “out there.” In reality, most policing involves surveilling and harassing poor and working-class people. When black and brown people are overrepresented among the ranks of the poor and working class, those people bear the brunt of encounters with police. Being killed by police is a leading cause of death for [young black men](#). Sociologist Frank Edwards has said that young black men have “better odds of being killed by police than . . . winning a lot of scratch off lottery games.” Pamela Turner, who suffered from schizophrenia, was in the crosshairs of the local police because of several minor infractions that brought her into contact with them. Last April, she was served with an [eviction notice](#) that resulted in a “criminal mischief” charge and an encounter with the same cop who eventually killed her weeks later.

Policing is the last public-sector service that our government strongly funds as it defunds and neglects all other aspects of the civic infrastructure. As public services across the country are dismantled, hundreds of millions of dollars are unearthed to pay off police brutality and police murder lawsuits. [Chicago](#) alone has spent over [\\$800 million](#) since 2004 to settle lawsuits for police brutality and wrongful deaths.

If any other public institution incurred that kind of expense, its budget and service would be shrunk or it would be shut down. For example, when in 2012 the Chicago Board of Education claimed it was running a billion-dollar deficit, its proposed solution was to close fifty-two public schools. But in the midst of revelations about Rahm Emanuel’s attempt to cover up the role of police in the [murder of Laquan McDonald](#), the mayor received the blessing of the Chicago City Council to break ground on a new \$95 million police academy.

No matter how corrupt, violent, or racist police are, their budgets will never shrink. Elected officials and the rich and powerful whose interests they often represent know that as public expenditures get cut, and as good jobs with benefits get further out of reach, police abuse brings order to a potentially untenable situation. The pain and suffering of Pamela Turner’s grandchildren, or Laquan McDonald’s mother, or Mike Brown Jr’s parents are collateral damage in this war to maintain the status quo. It is literally the price of doing business.

Thus, five years later, much of the institutional discussion about police reform remains focused on bad apples, implicit bias, and better training. As a result, the main policy shift has been the widespread use of “body cameras.” Since 2014, police forces around the country have spent upwards of \$192 million on body cameras. In Ferguson, [where the movement found its heart and soul, there are now more black police officers than white](#). Ferguson finally caught up with the rest of the United States. Meanwhile, black people are stopped 5 percent more and white people are stopped 11 percent less than they were in 2013.

Recognizing the stubborn duration of police abuse and violence is less about pessimism than it is about sobriety. There is no quick fix to police brutality. The police are so difficult to transform because the bipartisan political establishment needs them, especially when it decides it has nothing left to give us. It took five long and deadly years for the officials who manage the New York Police Department to fire an officer who choked the life out of a man who was plainly saying, “I can’t breathe.” It took five years for the Department of Justice to decide that it would not bring federal civil rights charges against Pantaleo, as if his illegal chokehold that took Garner’s life was not the textbook definition of a civil rights violation.

But what is the value of protecting the “rule of law” when the law itself prioritizes what is valued by the elite, while ignoring what is valued by most of us? In other words, neither the law nor law enforcement is on our side, and that ultimately makes the movement to reform either extremely difficult. It is usually the case, then, that we get the kind of change we desire when we pressure and coerce the political class, their establishment, and their laws, to see and hear us. And to do that, it matters how we organize, what we think, what we demand, and what we imagine and hope for.

These are key values for any social movement. Democracy, where we see all of our aspirations, our failures, and our endeavors as connected, means trying to bring in as many as possible and figuring out how to make it work. Black lives *can* matter. But it will demand a struggle to not only change the police, but to change the world that relies on the police to manage its unequal distribution of the necessities of life.

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### **Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor**

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