

# Police violence in United States: six years after Ferguson, George Floyd's killing shows little has changed

Saturday 30 May 2020, by [McCARTHY Tom](#) (Date first published: 30 May 2020).

After the African American teenager Michael Brown was shot dead by a white police officer [in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014](#), the epidemic of police violence against people of color in the US captured national and global attention, for a time.

When Brown was killed, the words of Eric Garner, gasping "[I can't breathe](#)" as he was crushed by officers in New York City a month earlier, were still echoing in the national conversation. Protests rose up in Ferguson, a new movement for racial justice grew under [the banner of Black Lives Matter](#), and talk of systemic reform filled the air.

Six years have passed. As national protests spread anew in reaction to [the death in Minneapolis of George Floyd](#), another African American man killed by another white officer, a growing chorus could be heard to ask what America has done to stanch the bleeding. A tragic answer hung heavily in the air.

"What is true about this moment that was also true in 2014 is that these are the symptoms of a centuries-old virus of white supremacy in America," said Brittany Packnett Cunningham, co-founder of the [Campaign Zero](#) movement against police violence.

"The expectation that black activists and organizers and writers and leaders alone were going to be able to solve this in six years is as insulting as it is unrealistic.

"It's unrealistic because it took us hundreds of years to get into this set of circumstances, and it's going to take us more than six years to get us out. And it's insulting because it's actually the work of non-black people to uproot anti-blackness, and it is the work of white people to dismantle white supremacy, because it directly benefits them."

Floyd, 46, [died under the knee of a white police officer](#) as he struggled to echo Garner's words: "I can't breathe."

The killing came even as the country struggled to come to grips with the cold-blooded shootings of a young jogger, [Ahmaud Arbery](#), in Georgia, and a medical technician, [Breonna Taylor](#), by police inside her home in Kentucky.

"This shouldn't be 'normal' in 2020 in America," former president Barack Obama said in a statement on Friday, alluding to another recent incident, in which a white woman in Central Park in New York [threatened to call police](#) on an African American birdwatcher.

"We have to remember that for millions of Americans," Obama said, "being treated differently on account of race is tragically, painfully, maddeningly 'normal' - whether it's while dealing with the healthcare system, or interacting with the criminal justice system, or jogging down the street, or just watching birds in the park."

Waves of activism in the wake of the Ferguson protests created reform in some cities and some police operations. Major departments in cities including Baltimore, Chicago, Denver, Oakland and Los Angeles have adopted more restrictive policies governing the use of force, a step research indicates is effective at reducing police violence, said [Samuel Sinyangwe](#), a data scientist and activist.

“There have been some changes, in particularly the largest cities in America,” Sinyangwe said. “In the departments that have begun to implement these changes, we’ve seen reductions in police violence. It doesn’t mean that is a magic solution or enough to fix this whole problem, but it is something that can make a difference.”

There is less evidence to indicate that measures such as implicit bias training or body cameras have correlated with a reduction in police violence, Sinyangwe said, although body cameras seem to have contributed to an increase in accountability for officers involved in incidents of excessive use of force.

Public awareness of police violence against people of color has grown thanks to the advocacy of high-profile figures such as [the former football star Colin Kaepernick](#), who was rejected by the NFL – and suffered attacks by Donald Trump – for kneeling during the national anthem.

The conversation around racial justice has marginally improved in the six years since Ferguson, Packnett Cunningham said.

“There is an improved public conversation and increased action on the part of some white people,” she said. “The number of people who are taking responsibility for their own actions has yet to reach critical mass by a long shot. But six years ago, we were simply trying to make America aware of what we suffer.

“Six years later many more people – not enough, but many more people – are further along in their awareness, and they’re able to step much more immediately into action. And all of that is due to the painstaking work, and sometimes lethal work, of black people.”

DeRay Mckesson, a key organizer of the Ferguson protests and voice in the Black Lives Matter movement, reflected on the legacy of the movement [in an interview](#) with the Guardian last year.

“It changed the country,” he said. “It opened up a wave of activism across a host of areas and focused citizens in a way that is truly special.”

But each step forward can seem to be met with two steps back. The election of Obama, for all its promise of racial unity, was followed by the election of Donald Trump, who in a tweet on Friday called protesters in Minneapolis “thugs” and threatened to have them shot.

### **‘An experience of overwhelm’**

Even amid the coronavirus pandemic, as crime and arrests have fallen, the number of people shot and killed by on-duty police officers has [kept pace with recent years](#). Unarmed black Americans are shot and killed by police at a rate [triple their share](#) of the population.

Sometimes, as with the killing of Floyd, video emerges that galvanizes the public. But no one knows how many murders never reach the public eye. In Tallahassee, Florida, [activists are clamoring](#) for more information about the killing this week by police of Tony McDade, a black transgender man.

Police officers who kill people of color remain seemingly beyond the reach of the law, [rarely facing prosecution](#). None of the officers in the deaths of Garner, Brown or Taylor has been criminally charged. Occasionally police are held accountable, as when Chicago officer Jason van Dyke was [convicted of second-degree murder](#) for shooting Laquan McDonald 16 times in October 2014.

Prosecutors in Minneapolis announced that the officer who knelt on Floyd's neck, Derek Chauvin, was arrested on Friday and [charged](#) with third-degree murder and manslaughter.

"We entrust our police officers to use certain amounts of force to do their job to protect us," said Hennepin county attorney Mike Freeman. "They commit a criminal act if they use this force unreasonably."

Packnett Cunningham said: "Black Americans are experiencing this moment as an experience of overwhelm.

"There is danger lurking in every corner right now. We are [disproportionately dying from Covid-19](#), we are a disproportionate amount of frontline essential workers, we are a disproportionate amount of the people police are arresting due to social distancing regulations, we are obviously a disproportionate amount of people being killed by police, we are also being killed by vigilantes and threatened by white liberal women walking their dogs in Central Park.

"The experience is one that threatens to shrink your whole world, because in every direction you turn there is the potential for instantaneous and unexpected danger and or death."

**Tom McCarthy**, national affairs correspondent

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## P.S.

• The Guardian. Sat 30 May 2020 11.00 BST:

<https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/may/30/michael-brown-ferguson-america-george-floyd>

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