

Why aren't officers held accountable for their actions?

By Peace Agbavito

To all my fellow WIU students, my name is Peace Agbavito. I am a freshman majoring in International Relations and minoring in International Business. I was born in Togo, Africa. I came to the United States in 2010 at the age of 9. As someone who is not from the U.S. who has lived here for a long time, I have a different perspective on racism in this country. I want to talk about an important issue that has been happening for years, yet nothing has been done to fix it. I also want to encourage you to try to find a solution or educate people who do not understand what it means to be discriminated against based on skin color. Black people are perceived to be dangerous due to their skin color. A survey conducted by the *Chicago Tribune* in Chicago showed 34 percent of black people do not feel safe around officers, nor do they trust officers either (Sweeney). Black Chicagoans have the highest rate of car stops, and 19 percent of Chicago officers would point guns at them (Sweeney). Officers took an oath to protect civilians regardless of skin color. Chicago police should be fired for discriminating against black people due to widespread civil rights abuse and to form a better relationship with the black community.

The deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor not only shook this country but also showed how racism is deeply rooted in law enforcement. Chicago and urban communities across America saw protests over the final verdict in the demise of Taylor, after which no officer was charged in her shooting in her home during the execution of a “no-knock” warrant, and the death of Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis. Officers tend to make assumptions that all black people are dangerous to society and should be locked up. For example, according to the *Chicago Tribune* article, Rashawn Lindsey was walking home with his cousin and his friend when they

were stopped by officers. The officers handcuffed them while searching them. Before they left, Lindsey heard one of the officers say: “I guess you’re one of the good ones” (Sweeney). Even though black people have the same rights as every civilian in this country they still feel as though they are still slaves due to being discriminated against.

I am not saying every Chicago officer discriminates against black people. I believe there are good officers in the police department, but cops who abuse the law by discriminating against black people should not only be fired but be held accountable for their actions. I understand they have a hard job. They have a split second to decide when confronted with dangerous situations. It does not give them the right to abuse the law or think they are above the law. I know some people do not understand the heartache black people experience with officers. Some people believe black people are exaggerating and should treat officers with the utmost respect. Respect is a two-way street, so how can black people respect officers when they do not get respected? Even our bail system is racist. Most black people stuck behind bars despite being presumed innocent are unable to pay bonds for release because bail money tends to be set higher for black people (Troncoso). Most of the time officers arrest black people because they fit the description, and it causes the media to portray black people in a negative light, which makes people fear black people. The justice system itself is inherently racist and it does not protect the rights of black individuals.

Young black people tend to be charged as an adult for misdemeanor crimes. Teenagers are vulnerable to peer pressure, and a study on an adolescent brain shows how they cannot see the consequences of their actions (Eldeib). Black teenagers only make up 15 percent of the state populace yet make up 70 percent of youths detained by the Department of Juvenile Justice

(Eldeib). Black teenagers tend to get harsher punishment due to their skin color. For instance, 15-year-old Grace from Michigan was sent to the juvenile detention center for not doing her homework by Gov. Gretchen Whitmer (Cohen). It was unethical punishment because many students and teachers struggled transitioning to online learning during the pandemic. I had difficulty transitioning to online learning because I was used to in-person learning for 18 years, and I had a hard time trying to find where my assignments were for my classes. Grace had a history of stealing and fighting with her mom. I am not excusing her past behaviors, but she made progress in the right direction to better herself and her relationship with her mom. Every teacher and student across America struggled with the transition, and Grace has ADHD, which means she needs instruction or structure to get her assignments done but was not given either one. She felt unmotivated and got distracted easily. Gov. Whitmer made a detrimental mistake in sending Grace to a juvenile detention center without finding a way to help her. She knew Grace has ADHD, and this transition was going to be hard on her. In my opinion, Gov. Whitmer should have talked to Grace to find ways to help her get her assignments done or talk to her teachers to try to find a solution rather than sending her to a juvenile detention center.

As a society, we talk about holding people accountable for their actions, but why not hold officers responsible for discrimination? Black people should not be discriminated against in everyday life. It is time for officers to take the initiative to try to build a better relationship with the black community by owning up to their wrongdoing and fulfilling the oath they took before becoming an officer. Officers should hold seminars to hear what black people experience at the hand of officers and ask for input on how they can bridge the gaps that have divided black people and officers for years. I also want to encourage WIU students to engage in uncomfortable

conversations about injustice and race with friends and family members and hold seminars to learn more about racism from their black peers.

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