



My parents have the cutest love story. They met in 1984 while working as jail officers in Virginia. My father was a recent hire who completed four years of service in Japan as a Marine. My mother was a recent grad who moved to Virginia after receiving her degree in criminal justice.

When I was younger, I respected all police officers because I knew policing was dangerous. I realized this in elementary school after I mishandled my mother's duty belt and accidentally sprayed myself with mace. Soon after this self-inflicted injury, I told my mother if I could unknowingly activate her weapon, then most police officers must experience a similar struggle. My mother objected, "Well-trained officers are never that clumsy."

I now realize my childhood experiences were privileged. The police in my neighborhood weren't my enemies; they were my parents' coworkers. When a white police officer looked at me, he didn't perceive a threat; he saw the lieutenant's daughter. My sheriff was an African American Republican — and none of these facts felt odd to me. Being "Black" wasn't synonymous with oppression and poverty; it was a cool physical attribute that connected me with world changers like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

My attitude towards police officers changed once I moved to New York City in 2010. During my eight years in "the city," I discovered a terrible truth: My upbringing, education and financial standing were not enough to protect me from police misconduct. While living in NYC, police officers would often publicly harass me, physically intimidate me and dismiss my concerns. In response, I started working with advocacy groups in Harlem where I learned that NYPD's over-policing of communities of color

produces a cycle of incarceration and institutionalization that forces many Black men (and their families) to remain in generational poverty. This remains true in NYC and in many parts of America.

My miseducation in childhood was the belief that all police officers are well-meaning. But there are many precincts nationwide where officers are dedicated to perpetuating racial and social terror when they should be protecting the peace.

On May 25, 2020, a white police officer murdered an innocent African American man named George Floyd by kneeling on his neck for 8 minutes and 46 seconds. Earlier in May, a video showing a young African American man named Aumad Arbery being shot to death by two white men went viral after an New York Times investigation. In March, a young African American woman named Breonna Taylor was shot eight times by three white police officers who broke into her home while she was sleeping. These are just a few examples in a series of reports of innocent, unarmed Black people being executed by police. This is alarming, infuriating and has sparked a series of violent and nonviolent protests in major U.S. cities.

I can't bring myself to watch the footage of George Floyd being strangled to death, but I remember watching the video of Eric Garner in 2014 while working in NYC. The image still haunts me today. I feel defenseless every time I think about Eric Garner and others like Trayvon Martin who've lost their lives because of the negative associations linked to blackness.

I believe most racists see Black people through a distorted lens created by centuries of media misrepresentations, class warfare and cultural fault lines. Most stereotypes about Black people aren't true, but they persist because these lies occupy a space in racist white consciousness that is rarely investigated or challenged. These unexamined racist toxins have infected the American police force to the extent that they are waging a unilateral and covert war against American citizens.

What does this war look like?

It is the failure of our federal and state laws to prosecute men who kill other men. This failure is an affront to our constitution; it corrodes our democracy and it is slowly turning our beloved nation into a police state. No one, regardless of race, gender or profession, should be above the law.

It would be an oversimplification to state that racism is the sole cause of the almost 1,000 annual cases of U.S. police lethality. I also believe we should explore our country's aggressive and militaristic culture which is responsible for the normalized overuse and of guns.

America is the most violent country in the developed world. We sell more weapons, murder more people and incarcerate more of our citizens than Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand combined. According to Rutgers University Professor Paul Hirschfield, American police are 18 times more lethal than Danish police and 100 times more lethal than Finnish police. In 2019, America suffered 255 mass shootings. This is America, but this is not who we are meant to be.

We are destroying our nation through infighting, culture wars, mass shootings, police killings, domestic violence and the glorification of machismo. Our actions are sending a message to the rest of the world that we are about to self-destruct.

I believe police officers have lost sight of their symbolic function in our society: they are role models. If the police can't model good behavior, then there is little hope for the rest of us. We need to raise the

bar for our police force.

If you want to engage in anti-racist work and police reform, visit to send a copy of The Policing Pledge to your local police department. This pledge is part of a grassroots movement to end police brutality. Although it could take years to amend certain laws, your chief of police has the power to immediately revise the code of conduct for officers in your area.

For those who feel traumatized by images of police brutality remember: We are not victims. We are more powerful than any racist person or institution that seeks to oppress us. We are victorious simply by existing and our willingness to continue is a testament to our resilience.

*Shea Graham is a counselor in private practice. She specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy and mindfulness to help people cope with anxiety and depression. Her office is located in Charlottesville.*

*An unabridged version of this piece appears in her Medium post.*