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How We Move Beyond Dallas

Calls for healing and reconciliation in the wake of recent racial violence overlook the substantive, concrete steps that experts say would help forestall the next police tragedy.

BY SPENCER OVERTON & KAMI CHAVIS JULY 13, 2016



(PHOTO: AP/GERALD HERBERT)

Since the shootings in Louisiana, Minnesota, and Texas, we have heard a lot about the need for racial healing. Americans have called for empathy, compassion, reconciliation, and unity. They remind us that most police officers and most African Americans are good people.

This is comforting language, but we need to move beyond soothing rhetoric to fix the problems that underlie racial violence in America. In all likelihood, our feel-good moment will pass, and most of us will return to our same social and political circles and daily routines. We are only human, and will

tend to revert to traditional patterns of thinking about these issues. In three months we could be right back where we were last week.

To move forward, we need real deliverables. We need tangible, permanent, systemic changes that anticipate implicit bias and rage and limit the harm.

A starting point would be to establish real checks on implicit racial bias. Sarah Palin, Rudy Giuliani, and others have argued that most police officers are good, that there is a war on police, and even that the Black Lives Matter movement is "inherently racist" for emphasizing the value of black life.

This approach ignores a police violence problem that disproportionately endangers African Americans. Human beings of all racial backgrounds-including police-have implicit biases that can prompt them to make bad decisions in tense situations. Implicit biases are automatic reactions in response to negative stereotypes-even when those stereotypes are factually wrong and at odds with the individual's own values. Despite overwhelming evidence that the vast majority of black males do *not* commit violent crimes, stereotypes about black male violence represent one of the most prevalent biases in American culture.

This bias can be deadly. For example, in a study using computer simulations, police officers shot armed black males more quickly than armed white males. In a laboratory setting, this study illustrates what many have argued was at play in the fatal shootings of Tamir Rice in Cleveland and Philando Castile in Minnesota. When a black male is involved, the police shoot far faster, failing to exercise the caution that would save innocent lives. The most common police errors, the study found, included shooting unarmed African American men, and not shooting armed white men. (In real life, officers should not shoot people simply because they are armed.) Using a similar methodology, Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff has shown that some police

officers' perceptions of African American males as hyper-masculine can escalate minor disputes into deadly situations.

Not all the research is unanimous: A new study on police use of force in ten cities found that police officers are more likely to push, use pepper spray or a baton on, or point a gun at-but not to shoot-African Americans.

There are solutions.

Research shows that the media and popular culture have perpetuated the harmful stereotypes that correlate blackness with dangerousness-but that they can also be powerful forces in correcting those stereotypes and decreasing implicit biases.

In the meantime, departments can assess implicit bias in new recruits and in current officers, and can train police to mitigate it. They can also provide officers training in de-escalation tactics. Departments can improve police-community relations through community satisfaction surveys, civilian review boards, body cameras, and independent investigations and prosecutions in shootings by police officers. They can also collect key data on the use of force, and on the race of individuals stopped or arrested by police. These and other solutions are spelled out in a string of government and expert reports, including the Obama administration's Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing; the findings of the Center for Policing Equity; and the Engaging Communities in Reducing Gun Violence report put out by our own Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies.

The problem is not that most police officers are bad. (Implicit bias is not about "good" or "bad," but simply reflects how the brain makes neurological associations and perceives threats after years of exposure to local news, movies, and other experiences.) The problem is that even though the science shows significant numbers of officers are more likely to use force against African Americans than against whites under identical circumstances, too many of the nation's 18,000 police departments fail to adopt solutions. By failing to address this problem before the next police officer overreacts and tragically kills an African American, some police departments are, in effect, sending a message that black lives don't matter to them.

Also crucial is keeping guns out of the wrong hands. As we saw in Dallas, where a sniper angered by racial killings fatally shot five police officers, firearms pose a particular risk to law enforcement officials. Micah Xavier Johnson used a semiautomatic SKS rifle and a high-capacity handgun. From 2005 to 2014, guns were the most common weapon used to kill law enforcement officers-responsible for 85 percent to 96 percent of all officer slayings. Firearms also pose a particularly lethal threat in the African American community. In 2014, African Americans accounted for 13 percent of the U.S. population, but 57 percent of gun homicide victims. Easy access to guns in the United States poses a threat to everyone.

Again, commonsense policy solutions exist. We need to prevent the diversion of firearms to people at high risk of engaging in gun violence. We can do this through universal background checks, mandatory reporting for lost and stolen firearms, permit-to-purchase laws, and increased oversight of licensed firearm dealers. We also need meaningful restrictions on assault weapons, on high-capacity ammunition magazines, and on armor-piercing "cop-killer" bullets.

Unfortunately, the voices and lives of African Americans have been marginalized in the gun-safety debate. Studies suggest that the demand by some for unregulated access to guns is driven, in

part, by fear of African Americans. In 2015, for example, social scientists published a study that found that showing pictures of black people to white people reduced white support for gun control. Another study found that U.S. whites who were more likely to describe blacks as violent and to discount historical racism were more likely to oppose gun-control policies. Such fears persist despite the fact that in 2014, 82.4 percent of white murder victims were killed by whites, compared to 14.8 percent killed by African Americans. We must acknowledge the role that implicit bias plays in both policing and in the gun violence debate.

After Louisiana, Minnesota, and Texas, we need mourning and reconciliation. But that's not enough. In the long term, we need education and economic development policies that address quality-of-life issues that are beyond the capacity of the criminal justice system. But right now, we need concrete solutions to systematically limit the harm inflicted by implicit bias and gun violence.