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### Reducing Community Violence While Protecting Civil Rights

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## OPINION &gt; CONGRESS BLOG

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## Reducing community violence while protecting civil rights

BY KAMI CHAVIS, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 02/15/23 8:00 PM ET



*FILE – In this image from video released and partially redacted by the city of Memphis, Tenn., Tyre Nichols lies on the ground during a brutal attack by Memphis Police officers on Jan. 7, 2023, in Memphis. Officials said Tuesday, Feb. 7, that a total of 13 Memphis officers could end up being disciplined in connection with the violent arrest of Nichols, as city council members expressed frustration with the city's police and fire chiefs during a meeting for not moving quickly on specific policy reforms in the month since Nichols' brutal beating. (City of Memphis via AP, File)*

Violence in America was a prominent theme as President Biden's State of the Union address followed the fatal beating of Tyre Nichols, whose heartbroken parents attended the speech. Similarly, the president spoke forcefully against the surge in gun violence and other violent crime, a problem facing many American cities.

Ironically, combating violent crime has been used nationwide to justify the creation of specialized units and aggressive policing tactics, both of which led directly to Nichols' senseless death (and the deaths of too many others to name here). The goals of reducing community violence and protecting the civil rights of those who live in our most vulnerable are not mutually exclusive.

In order to address both police violence and community gun violence, we must accept that each of these phenomena are unique to the United States. Notably, each of these problems disproportionately impact Black people, with Black men particularly vulnerable to both.

Nearly a year and a half after George Floyd's murder sparked both anger and widespread police reforms in cities and states across the United States, police in the United States had killed 1176 people, making 2022 the deadliest year for police violence. No other western nation has the number of police-related deaths in custody as the United States. Similarly, in 2022, gun-related homicides surged to approximately 40,000, and Black men were disproportionately impacted by gun-violence. Gun-related homicides in the United States far surpass those of other nations.

As policymakers seek solutions to violent crime, it has been common to turn to harsh criminal justice solutions as a means to catch or deter possible offenders. Calls for additional police officers and a "crackdown" on crime are common refrains that no doubt led to creating the Scorpion Unit in Memphis, the specialized unit where the officers indicted in Nichols' murder worked. But it is clear that while many residents of communities acutely impacted by violence want to be safe, they do not want to be deemed a suspect as they go about routine tasks in their daily lives.

The persistent fear of "jump outs," as some specialized tactical police units are called, also makes it difficult for many residents to fathom partnering on "community policing" initiatives with those who have viewed them or their loved ones with contempt and suspicion. Anyone who has been pulled from a car while returning from work, or thrown against a wall on their way to school, may be unlikely to cooperate with law enforcement even when their families and friends are victims of crime.

Being followed and stopped by multiple police cars, dragged from your vehicle, and tased, as Tyre Nichols was, would be unthinkable for most Americans, particularly white Americans in affluent neighborhoods. Yet such encounters are all too real for Black Americans, particularly Black men.

In his speech, President Biden alluded to these disparities, noting that many black Americans are forced to give their sons "the talk." Your zip code or skin color should not determine the quantity and quality of your constitutional rights. Multiple studies show that blacks and Latinos are stopped and searched more than other groups, yet contraband, such as drugs and guns, are rarely

found during such encounters. Such ineffective tactics come not only at the expense of the individual's dignity, but impact the relationship with the entire community these officers purport to serve.

Furthermore, the mentality of "hot spot policing" automatically puts the officers who work in these designated areas on high alert and provides an expectation that violence will be necessary, or even encouraged, during these police/citizen encounters to effectuate a stop for the smallest infraction.

So what will force local police departments to change the way they police racial minorities and those living in impacted communities?

The Biden administration has done a laudable job in using tools within its authority to encourage police accountability and organizational reform. Immediately upon entering office, Biden's Department of Justice launched pattern or practice investigations into several police departments where high-profile police-related deaths had occurred, such as Minneapolis and Louisville.

After the then-Republican led Senate refused to pass the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, which included sweeping changes such as limiting certain uses of force, requiring data collection, and banning racial profiling, President Biden signed an Executive Order requiring these same reforms for federal agencies. These federal measures are important and can provide a blueprint of best practices and standards that local law enforcement agencies can use to address crime and hold officers accountable when they violate departmental policies, local and state laws, and the U.S. Constitution.

Although necessary, it is unlikely that the current Congress will approve a bipartisan federal bill that adequately addresses police reform at the national level. Therefore, the swift, sweeping changes necessary to address police violence must involve local and state jurisdictions.

Because of Nichol's death, Memphis has invited the Department of Justice to review its use of force policies. The DOJ does not have the resources to review every department, and departments should not wait until the next tragic death to assess tactics most know are violent and ineffective.

There is a wealth of knowledge available from previous federal investigations and reports that could provide guidance to America's 18,000 local police departments to prevent future police violence. Doing so might mean at least one less American family will be forced to bid farewell to their loved one too soon.

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**TAGS** BIDEN DOJ INVESTIGATIONS INTO POLICE DEPARTMENTS GUN  
VIOLENCE HOT SPOT POLICING VIOLENT CRIME