

# George Floyd, Racism and Law Enforcement

*Table Talk: Family Conversations about Current Events*

---



Fibonacci Blue | Flickr

## Topic Summary

On May 25, 2020, George Floyd, an African American man, died while being arrested by the police. A bystander video recording of the incident showed that a white police officer pinned Floyd to the ground while he was handcuffed. The police officer's knee pressed into the back of Floyd's neck for more than eight minutes, even after Floyd lost consciousness. On the video, Floyd was heard saying, "Please, I can't breathe. My stomach hurts. My neck hurts. Everything hurts. ... (I need) water or something. Please. Please. I can't breathe, officer. ... I cannot breathe. I cannot breathe." In a statement, the

Minneapolis Police Department said that officers had responded to a call about a man suspected of forgery.

The incident was shared widely on social media. This led to community and national outrage, an F.B.I. civil rights investigation and the firing of the officer, Derek Chauvin and three other officers who were also at the scene. On May 29, Chauvin was arrested and charged with third degree murder and manslaughter. Prosecutors said the investigation into the three other officers is ongoing.

### **Protests Across the Country**

Since Floyd's death, there have been protests across the country, in more than 100 cities including Minneapolis, New York City, Atlanta, Denver, Memphis, Phoenix, Ann Arbor, Los Angeles and other cities. Some of these protests have lasted for days. Several members of Congress have introduced a resolution to condemn police brutality, racial profiling and the excessive use of force.

There is a larger context and history of African American men and boys who were killed at the hands of the police, many of whom, like George Floyd, were unarmed. Since 2014, some high-profile deaths include Eric Garner (2014), Michael Brown (2014), Tamir Rice (2014), Laquan McDonald (2014), John Crawford (2014) Freddie Gray (2015), Walter Scott (2015), Alton Sterling (2016), Philando Castile (2016), Terence Crutcher (2016), Antwon Rose (2018) and others. Black women and girls are also targets of police violence, a reality that sparked the "Say Her Name" movement to highlight how this violence often goes unnoticed. Women who have died as a result of police interactions include Sandra Bland (2015), Deborah Danner (2016), and Atatiana Jefferson (2019) and Breonna Taylor (2020).

Despite having video recordings of many of these deaths, it is very rare for police officers to get arrested, prosecuted or convicted for excessive use of

force. This perceived lack of accountability has led to a public outcry for justice.

Black Lives Matter is an activist movement which began as a hashtag (#BlackLivesMatter) when in July 2013, white civilian George Zimmerman was acquitted in the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed African American teenager killed in Florida. The Black Lives Matter movement became more widely acknowledged and highlighted after two 2014 high-profile deaths of unarmed African American men (Eric Garner in Staten Island, NY and Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO). Neither of the police officers involved in their deaths were indicted (i.e., formally charge with a crime).

## **Systemic Racism**

Racism is defined as: “the marginalization and/or oppression of people of color based on a socially constructed racial hierarchy that privileges white people.” Racism shows up in all aspects of our lives and society: in interpersonal communication, through discriminatory policies and practices, in biased language, and in our laws and institutions (e.g., education, media, employment, government and the criminal justice system).

Many see Floyd’s death as an example of systemic racism, referring to the way race disadvantages people of color in the criminal justice system. African American and Latinx men are disproportionately represented in all levels of the criminal justice system, from arrest to sentencing to death row.

Moreover, research shows that African American people are 2.5 times more likely to be killed by police than white people.

## **How Hate and Bias Escalate**

On the same day that George Floyd was killed, another incident occurred in Central Park in New York City. Christian Cooper, an African American man, was birdwatching when he encountered an unleashed dog. He asked the dog’s owner, Amy Cooper (no relation), a white woman, to put the dog on a leash as the park

rules require. When she did not, he began to film her. In response, Amy Cooper said she would call the police, stating “I’m going to tell them there’s an African American man threatening my life” while pulling out her cellphone and calling 911.

While these two events appear to be unrelated, they both demonstrate a very important concept: when left unchecked, hate and bias can escalate and lead to dire outcomes.

The Pyramid of Hate illustrates how the levels of biased attitudes and behaviors grow in complexity from the bottom to top. Like a pyramid, the upper levels are supported by the lower levels and it becomes increasingly difficult to challenge and dismantle as behaviors escalate. Bias at each level negatively impacts individuals, institutions and society. When bias goes unchecked, it becomes “normalized” and contributes to a pattern of accepting discrimination, hate and injustice in society.

Amy Cooper’s anger and bias led her to threaten Christian Cooper with the bias she assumed the police would have when she described the man who was threatening her as African American. This is a situation that could have easily escalated if the police arrived on the scene and engaged in a confrontation, or worse, with Christian Cooper. All too quickly and pervasively, the escalation of bias and hate has led to violence and the deaths of George Floyd and many others.

## **Age**

11 and up

## **Questions to Start the Conversation**

- What were your initial thoughts and feelings when you heard about what happened to George Floyd?
  - In your opinion, what should happen next?
-

- Do you see people talking about this issue on the news, on social media or among your friends? What impact has that had on you?
- Why do you think the movement to stop police violence against African American people is called Black Lives Matter? What does it mean to you? What kind of change are activists and others calling for?
- In your own words, how would you describe the connection between the two incidents (the one in Central Park in NYC and the death of George Floyd)?

### **Questions to Dig Deeper**

(See the More Information section for articles and information that address these questions.)

- Are you surprised to learn that police officers have used force that has killed people?
- Why do you think it is rare for police officers to get arrested, prosecuted and convicted in these cases? What should be done about that?
- What can each of us do as individuals to stop the escalation of bias and hate? What can we do on a societal level?
- What are other ways that racism (or other forms of injustice) show up in our institutions (education, government, business, media, etc.) and what can we do about that?

### **Take Action**

Ask: What can we do to help? What actions might make a difference?

- Talk with others about what happened to George Floyd and the goals of the Black Lives Matter movement by sharing information on social media, having individual conversations or organizing an educational event in the school or community.
- Learn more about bias and talk together about how our biases may show up, especially on the lower levels of the Pyramid of Hate (i.e., biased attitudes,

acts of bias).

- Write a letter to your school or community newspaper about your thoughts and feelings about George Floyd and the racial disparities in the criminal justice system. In the letter, explain what you think should be done about it.
- Get involved in local activism on these or other issues of injustice that are important to you.

### **Additional Resources**

- Teaching about Racism, Violence, Inequity and the Criminal Justice System (Collection of resources)
- When Perception and Reality Collide: Implicit Bias and Race (ADL Lesson Plan)
- Race Talk: Engaging Young People in Conversations about Race and Racism
- The Hate U Give (Book of the Month discussion guides)
- 10 Ways Youth Can Engage in Activism

[BACK TO TABLE TALK](#)