

Sociologists Take Historic Stand on Racism and Police Brutality

Open Letter Addresses National Crises

By [Nicki Lisa Cole](#)



Mourners enter the funeral of Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO with hands raised in the "Don't Shoot" protest pose.

Scott Olson/Getty Images

This year's annual meeting of the American Sociological Association (ASA) recently took place in San Francisco. Coming on the heels of the killing of unarmed black teen Michael Ferguson Jr. at the hands of a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and in the midst of an ongoing community uprising shrouded in police brutality, many sociologists in attendance had the national crises of police brutality and [racism](#)¹ on their minds. The ASA however created no official space for discussion of these issues, nor has the 109 year-old organization made any kind of public statement on them, despite the fact that the amount of published sociological research on these issues could fill a library. Frustrated by this lack of action and dialog, some attendees created a grassroots discussion group and task force to address these crises.

Neda Maghbouleh, Assistant Professor of Sociology at University of Toronto-Scarborough, was one of those who took the lead. Explaining why, she said, "We had a critical mass of thousands of trained sociologists within two blocks of each other at ASA—equipped to marshal history, theory, data, and hard facts toward a social crisis like Ferguson. So ten of us, complete strangers, met for thirty minutes in a hotel lobby to hash out a plan to get as many concerned sociologists as possible to contribute to, edit, and sign a document. I was committed to helping in any way possible because it's moments like these that affirm the value of social science for society."

The "document" Dr. Maghbouleh refers to is an open letter to U.S. society at-large, that has been signed by over 1,400 sociologists, this author among them. [The letter](#)² begins by pointing out that what transpired in Ferguson is born of "deeply ingrained racial, political, social and economic inequities," and then specifically names the conduct of policing, especially in black communities and in the context of protest, as a serious social problem. The authors and signatories implore "law enforcement, policymakers, media and the nation to consider decades of sociological analysis and research that can inform the necessary conversations and solutions required to address the [systemic issues](#)³ that the events in Ferguson have raised."

The authors point out that much sociological research has already established the existence of society-wide problems present in the case of Ferguson, like "a pattern of racialized policing," historically rooted "institutionalized racism within police departments and the criminal justice system more broadly," the "[hyper-surveillance of black and brown youth](#)⁴," and the

disproportionate targeting of and disrespectful treatment of black men and women by police. These troubling phenomena foster suspicion about people of color, create an environment in which it is impossible for people of color to trust police, which in turn undermines the ability of police to do their job: serve and protect.

The authors write, “Instead of feeling protected by police, many African Americans are intimidated and live in daily fear that their children will face abuse, arrest and death at the hands of police officers who may be acting on implicit biases or institutional policies based on stereotypes and assumptions of black criminality.” They then point out that brutal police treatment of protestors is “rooted in the history of repression of African American protest movements and attitudes about blacks that often drive contemporary police practices.”

In response, sociologists call for “greater attention to the conditions (e.g., joblessness and political disenfranchisement) that have contributed to the marginalization of residents” of Ferguson and other communities, and explain that “focused and sustained government and community attention on these issues is required to bring about healing and a change in the economic and political structures that have thus far ignored and left many in such areas vulnerable to police abuse.”

The letter concludes with a list of demands required for “an appropriate response to the death of Michael Brown,” and to address the larger, nation-wide issue of racist police policies and practices:

1. Immediate assurance from law enforcement authorities in Missouri and the federal government that constitutional rights to peaceful assembly and freedom of the press will be protected.
2. A civil rights investigation into the incidents related to the death of Michael Brown and general police practices in Ferguson.
3. The establishment of an independent committee to study and analyze the failures of the policing efforts during the week following Michael Brown’s death. Ferguson residents, including leaders of grassroots organizations, should be included on the committee throughout this process. The committee must provide a clear roadmap for resetting community-police relations in a way that grants oversight power to residents.
4. An independent comprehensive national study of the role of implicit bias and systemic racism in policing. Federal funding should be allocated to support police departments in implementing the recommendations from the study and ongoing monitoring and public reporting of key benchmarks (e.g., use of force, arrests by race) and improvements in police practices.
5. Legislation requiring the use of dash and body-worn cameras to record all police interactions. Data from these devices should be immediately stored in tamper-proof databases, and there should be clear procedures for public access to any such recordings.
6. Increased transparency of public law enforcement, including independent oversight agencies with guaranteed full access to law enforcement policies and on-the-ground operations; and more streamlined, transparent and efficient procedures for the processing of complaints and FOIA requests.

7. Federal legislation, currently being developed by Rep. Hank Johnson (D-GA), to halt the transfer of military equipment to local police departments, and additional legislation to curtail the use of such equipment against domestic civilian populations.
8. Establishment of a 'Ferguson Fund' that will support long term strategies grounded in the principles of social justice, systems reform and racial equity to bring about substantial and sustained change in Ferguson and other communities facing similar challenges.

To learn more about the underlying issues of systemic racism and [police brutality](#)⁵, check out [The Ferguson Syllabus](#)⁶ compiled by [Sociologists for Justice](#)⁷. Many of the readings included are available online.

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