

# Trauma Triggers and Resilience: Reflecting on the Death of George Floyd and Its Impact on a Social Work Practitioner

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**Abstract:** This reflection centers on the wrongful demise of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man murdered by a Minneapolis police officer, and how his death uncovered my memories of a childhood traumatic experience involving police officers in the San Francisco/Oakland Bay area. It begins by placing this incident within the context of three critical issues impacting 2020: social unrest resulting from the rash of deaths of African Americans at the hands of police officers, the sudden spread of COVID-19 (or coronavirus), and the controversy surrounding the presidential elections. The coverage of these events across social media produced symptoms of generalized anxiety for many Americans including me. It also gave rise to the presence of multiple triggers leading to the resurgence of my childhood traumas following George Floyd's death. My traumatic childhood encounter is discussed in intricate detail and paralleled with the death of Mr. Floyd. Resilience and the recovery process are presented followed by strategies to eliminate racial injustice involving police in three key areas: public policy, programmatic initiatives, and policing practices. Finally, implications for future research direction are presented.

**Keywords:** post-traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), epidemic, pandemic, childhood trauma, George Floyd, police brutality

## Introduction

2020 will be a year not easily forgotten. It was as fiery, contentious, and concerning as the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. From the deaths of many unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police officers to the rapid spread of the coronavirus to the controversy surrounding the presidential elections, 2020 will be a year etched in my mind and the annals of history. The impact of these events on me places my reflections in context.

## Context

The sudden spread of the coronavirus infected, hospitalized, and killed hundreds of thousands in the United States. Preexisting health conditions and racial disparities emerged early in the data showing that African Americans were disproportionately represented in each of these categories (Gold et al., 2020). Distrust and skepticism concerning the virus spread, and vaccinations conjured memories of the troubling history involving medical research done by the U.S. government on the African American community. Mainly circulating were the syphilis experiments conducted in Tuskegee, Alabama (Heller et al., 1946) and The North Carolina Eugenics Program which involved mass sterilizations of impoverished Black women (Brophy & Troutman, 2015). This high level of justified paranoia in contrast with concern for personal safety has left many stressed and undecided concerning prevention and treatment. From a global

standpoint, I began to understand how the community responded to the impact of the coronavirus. From a more specific standpoint, my paranoia intensified after becoming infected and hospitalized. Suddenly any media coverage of daily hospitalizations and deaths triggered anxiety and stress reactions, including insomnia, loss of appetite, and apathy.

While the first case of the coronavirus in the United States was reported in January 2020, issues concerning police brutality and misconduct were a spillover from prior years that sharply increased during this time. The rash of killings of unarmed Black men and women at the hands of police officers who popularized the common defense, “I feared for my life,” outraged me. These atrocities resulted in community uprisings led by the youth and instigated civil unrest, rebellions, and a revolutionary effort to defund the police. Several voices, including mine, demanded the reallocation of funding to promote improved police and community relations; better recruitment, training, and re-training of officers; and fair treatment of African Americans by the criminal justice system. I felt these demands were reasonable, obtainable, and necessary. In his speech during an organized protest and rally in Brunswick, Georgia, following the death of Ahmaud Arbery, Francys Johnson, activist, civil rights attorney, and former President of the Georgia NAACP, captured this sentiment by saying, “Justice is not blind; she [just] has her eyes covered. We must remove the blinds and force her to see what this criminal justice system has become, demand changes and the prosecution of rogue police officers” (personal communication, May 16, 2020). This portion of the speech empowered key organizations that I belong to in and around the state of Georgia to move to action. Groups such as Let Us Make Man, the Black Man Lab, and many others focused their energy on training youth for engaging in successful organizing. Groups also learned the principles of successful protest participation, studied the past to advance change, and began to organize efforts to remove confederate statues and symbols from all government lands and facilities in Georgia. Similar efforts occurred globally. Soon, other symbols of systemic racism met a similar fate. Events such as these did not kill or eliminate racism, but they made us question the ideals and etiology of morality here.

The year 2020 was capped off by the controversy and hostility surrounding the presidential elections. It pulled the covers back on racism and inspired right-wing radical groups and their elected advocates in the House and Senate to come out of hiding, organize, and attempt to change the election results. Their battle cry “stop the steal” was inspired by misinformation that flooded social media, conservative and radical news sites. Their followers also unquestionably believed the leader of their movement, who maintained his position throughout his second impeachment trial. The far-right wing’s misinformed efforts attempted to disrupt the election process and attacked the United States Capitol just six days into the 2021 new year. Watching the mob unleashed on the U.S. Capitol and the police force’s powerlessness heightened my level of panic, stress, and anxiety that carried over from the previous year. The President’s failure to send support for the officers and elected officials was a stark contrast to the mass display of force shown at the Capitol during the Black Lives Matter demonstrations. This dichotomy left me perplexed and outraged. I could not fathom how the response to protest could be so radically different. On June 2, 2020, National Guard was deployed wearing full riot gear and blocked the entrance to the Lincoln Memorial to Black Lives Matter Protesters. These differences did not go unnoticed.

The coronavirus, social unrest, and the presidential elections are considered by many to be the most significant issues in 2020 that dominated America's social and political spectrum. No one, including myself, was exempt from the primary and secondary traumatic impacts these events caused. The processing of these incidents made it difficult for many as they grappled to understand each. For every family and individual, there is a story or experience linked to one of these events. For me, processing the effects of these events was not exclusive but rather cumulative.

### **The Triggers**

America could no longer hide its family secret; its race relations efforts had become undone at the seams. The rash of deaths in the last few years hangs like an albatross around America's neck. There are too many names, dates, and incidences to recall at once, but nevertheless, I find myself compelled to call out their names: Treyvon Martin, Oscar Grant, Eric Garner, Philando Castile, Catherine Johnson, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery.

The lynching museum in Montgomery, Alabama, has large rustic plates hanging from its ceiling. The names of thousands of African Americans are engraved on these plates to remind America of its dark past. We must also immortalize those lives unjustly lost by the hands of police officers.

The protest and social unrest, particularly surrounding George Floyd's death, were the most impactful for me. Repeatedly watching the recording of the incident triggered long-buried and oft-forgotten adverse experiences with police officers during my early childhood. As I watched the officer with his knees pressed against George Floyd's neck as Floyd cried, "I can't breathe," and called for his deceased mother, the emotions intensified. As the officer placed both hands in his pocket in a comfortable posture and leaned further into Mr. Floyd's neck to apply more pressure, I became enraged. The shock from this video was not limited to me; the world became outraged. The officer's malicious, callous, and blatant disregard for another human being sparked protests around the globe. From London, Switzerland, Wales, Germany, Brazil, Rome, Hong Kong, the Netherlands, Belgium, Portugal, South Africa, South Korea, and even Sydney, Australia, to name a few, people were outraged and moved to protest. Floyd's death represented the preverbal straw that broke the camel's back.

While the effect of the coronavirus and controversies surrounding the presidential election enhanced my distrust and concern for the safety of my community, the protests resulting from police brutality created a breeding ground of accumulated anxiety from which my past childhood traumas involving police brutality emerged in full detail.

### **The Encounter**

My first encounter with the police occurred in 1978 in Richmond, a city in the East Bay area of Northern California. Growing up in the Bay Area during this period was a combination of the very best of times and the very worst of times for police interaction and African Americans. A strained relationship between the police and the African American community already existed.

Many complaints and several lawsuits were filed against the police department concerning their misconduct. They, however, seemed to go without consequences. During this time, a particular group of White police officers known as the “Richmond Cowboys” were infamous for their assaults and history of abuse by many in the community (Center for the Study of Political Graphics, 2021)

I was 13 years old. My parents had a domestic dispute, which resulted in my three brothers, sister, and me being taken to my mother’s business. In the parking lot, we watched our father confront a person in the community. Except for my younger brother, who is three years younger than me, the rest of us are stair-stepped in age: a brother 14, a sister 15, and our oldest brother, 16 years old. My father stood about 6 feet and 1 inch tall; his arms and hands resembling that of a bodybuilder. He has dark skin and a booming voice. He had no problems commanding a room when he entered or getting us to respond to his calls.

Shortly after we arrived at my mother’s business, a small-statured White police officer came on the scene to address the confrontation. It was rare for a single officer to respond to any call in this part of the community. He successfully deescalated the conflict. We began to walk away from the scene and into an adjacent parking lot toward our car. However, several other officers appeared, which seemed to escalate tensions. They surrounded my father as he leaned against the car with his massive arms folded. It was clear that they were not going to allow him to leave without taking him into custody. We all stood off to a distance and could only faintly hear their conversations while the officers were drawing in closer to him. In watching our father’s body posture, which was all too familiar with us, we knew that he was becoming angrier as more officers arrived on the scene. We heard our father say, “It will take more than this to take me down.” It seemed his defiant stance excited them, causing the officers to close in much faster while removing their nightsticks from their waist.

Suddenly, an officer standing off to the side of my father raised his club to strike him, and with one blow, my father swung and knocked him out. A melee ensued, and they began to strike him across his head and body, knocking him to the ground. Terrified, we ran to his rescue. My oldest brother attempted to help, but they began beating him too. At 95 pounds, I ran and attempted to help, but I was tossed like a ragdoll over a car. My other siblings did not fare any better. In what seemed to be a lifetime, they finally had my father in handcuffs. His bloodied head was forced to the ground. An officer pressed his knee against my father’s neck and continuously applied pressure. I cried to my father to not move and stop resisting. I heard him say, “Son, I am not moving, I cannot breathe.” Suddenly, another officer took the back of his club and struck him on the forehead, causing substantial blood to flow. I ran to him and pulled my t-shirt over his head, begging them to please not strike him anymore. Again, I was tossed to the side and restrained by a family member. By the time it was over, my father and brother were placed in the back of the police car. Their heads and clothes were covered in blood which came from the open gashes in my father’s head, eyes, and the cuts on my brother’s hands. The police took them directly to jail. We believed they were both going to prison for a long time. Thankfully, that was not the case. Later that evening, my father was transported to the hospital to receive stitches. My mother was frantically trying to find out where my brother was transported. Our uncle arrived on the scene and took the rest of us to his house. We were terrified and felt helpless and powerless. Within 24

hours, my brother was released from custody to my mother. He didn't say a word or leave his room for nearly three days. It seemed impossible to process all that had occurred. There were no social workers or counselors available to provide trauma-informed care, so we talked about the incident among ourselves. We acknowledged our father's treatment of our mother as precipitating the event. But the viciousness of the police was beyond our comprehension and ultimately changed our view of law enforcement.

Because of the level of brutality, the tremendous number of witnesses, the department's history of documented misconduct, and other unknown factors, the charges against my father and brother were eventually dropped. Our father returned to the house for a few months following the incident. He talked openly with us about the reputation of this group of police officers and how there would be no repercussions. Our father eventually moved out and our parents divorced. He remained peripheral in our lives as our mother continued to raise the five of us. The "Encounter" arguably shaped my need to feel safe in my community and heightened my expectations of adults as those responsible for our safety. Exposure to negative and traumatic police encounters like this, I later found out, were experiences that were not isolated to my town. It would be years before I understood how these stories and their lasting effects would shape the consciousness of a nation. I learned of the parallel between this experience and the many tales told by African Americans across the United States.

### **Trauma and Signs of PTSD**

This encounter left an indelible mark on me. I was a thirteen-year-old male simultaneously living with the separation of my parents, the constant memory of my father being beaten by the "Richmond Cowboys," and my inability to help either situation. I believe I suffered from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), although I was never diagnosed or treated. According to Zlotnic et al. (2008), events that transpire in childhood typically have a long-lasting impact; they purport that symptoms of PTSD have the potential to linger well into our adulthood.

The encounter brought about nightmares about the incident and intermittent flashbacks when the police walk near or drive by with flashing lights. I intentionally avoided situations where I would encounter the police. For example, when I was 15, I quit playing baseball in the Police Athletic League because many coaches and umpires were police officers or were associated with law enforcement. While many of my peers, as well as adults in the community, viewed them as role models and, to some degree father figures, I became disconnected. There was an unconscious betrayal that I felt by them, a violation that I could not put into words, but my disjointed feelings would subsequently manifest into disdain. I would probe my friends and family members about police distrust and the legacy of fear.

As random police sightings continued, I began to develop negative thoughts about myself as a young Black male. I wondered if I was destined to go to prison. I felt helpless during that traumatizing encounter and an overall sense of hopelessness for Black males in the criminal justice system. I also experienced significant changes in my physical and emotional reactions. The sudden sound of police sirens made me nervous, anxious, and unable to concentrate. I engaged in self-destructive behaviors, was always angry and irritable, but I could not understand

why. I started fighting and acting out in school. In retrospect, I was powerless during the encounter and found that power through fighting other kids. I ended relationships with some of my close White friends. My trust in relationships with that friend group dissipated.

I was always a quiet kid in constant deep thought. I used to write poetry masquerading as songs, but in truth, this encounter with the police closed the doors on all creativity. Our family suffered also. We never really talked about the incident. Counseling was never a consideration. This is perhaps rooted in my family's values of hard work for survival. A Black male therapist during this time would have provided us with the needed counseling and professional imagery to counterbalance what became our jaded reality. This need was an integral part of my choice to join the social work profession.

In my estimation, my initial "treatment" came from the security I felt while sitting around my grandmother and listening to her hum church songs. The lyrics held hope, and the tune felt comforting. My informal treatment also involved being in the living room with my grandfather as he listened to the San Francisco Giants on his small transistor radio. He always sat in his favorite chair and did not mind our presence, although his attention was fixed on the game. My grandparents created a sense of normalcy and safety for me. This safety net was encouraging, and it assured me that the emotions, feelings, and constant fears were not permanent fixtures in my life.

### **Resilience and the Recovery Process**

"Resilience is one's capacity and ability to adapt in positive manifestations following adversity or environmental stressors and having a sense of purposeful living" (Glenn, 2014, pp. 39-40). Embedded in this discussion on resilience are solutions and strategies that aid in overcoming the trauma and countering triggers. To put traumatic events behind us, the three biggest lies we tell ourselves are to "let it ride, let it slide, and let it go." In truth, trauma, like cancer, will grow and fester if left untreated or unaddressed. Yehuda et al. (2006) studied the co-existence of resilience and forms of psychopathology; they found that there are those who survive trauma and do not develop psychopathology, thereby acknowledging resilience as a function of coping with trauma. This suggests that while forming resilience, the traumatic event(s) has the potential to ultimately impact the mind, body, and spirit. Without addressing the intrusive memories, intentional avoidance, and negative changes in thinking and mood, trauma will manifest through relationships and produce random triggers. For example, repeatedly watching racialized violence and fatal encounters between police officers and Black men on television and social media can ignite triggers associated with past traumas. In my case, it was seeing Officer Derek Chauvin's knee placed against George Floyd's neck that reminded me of my own father's trying ordeal and resurrected discouraging attitudes toward the police. Ang (2020) notes that adverse police encounters with Black male teenagers play a role in the development of their confidence in the police. Thus, resilience and recovery in this context can be understood as dynamic, changing with sudden and fragile triggers. Critical to this recovery and treatment process is innate resiliency. It is the capacity to recover from complex events, withstand adversity, bounce back, and re-channel negative thoughts, emotions, and behaviors into positive energy and outlook. Resilience can contain the impact of trauma and give one the ability to bring closure to difficult

chapters in ones' life.

My father has never forgotten the incident and could recall specific details during our interviews for this reflection. Despite being brutalized by the police and beaten to near-death during my teenage years, he insisted that all his sons become police officers or work with law enforcement in any capacity. We struggled to reconcile his persistent recommendation with our traumatic memory of the encounter until he explained his position. He provided significant clarity and unraveled our discontent with law enforcement. My father did not disregard the pain we endured. Yet, he firmly believed that the only way to change police departments and prevent future misconduct was to run for a political office, become a lawyer, or join the police force and move up through the ranks. He cautioned us not to lose our sense of identity as Black men and to weed out rogue police officers (and those who cover up for them), whether Black or White. His perspective provided the necessary avenue for me to maintain a sense of power and sustainability for change, growth, and development. He helped me understand that I had a role in creating the change.

I began my work on the accused side of family conflict and police misconduct. While in graduate school at Clark Atlanta University School of Social Work in 1993, I conducted my internship at one of Georgia's oldest and largest family service agencies. I received training from clinical social workers who were responsible for the collaboration between the Domestic Crisis Intervention Unit and the Atlanta Police Department. These clinicians traveled with police officers during domestic calls and often deescalated arguments and provided family resources. Their training and expertise were imparted to me as I entered the social work profession. I continue my work in these areas today. Within my practice as a licensed social worker, I am certified by the Georgia Commission on Family Violence to conduct court-ordered groups for men and women charged with family violence, battery, assault, and other violence-related charges associated with family members and intimate partners. I also conduct community-based anger management groups and work with high-conflict couples. I am also a member of several Black community-based organizations that address family, community-related issues, and focus on community empowerment. This reflective holistic approach re-channeled the impact of my trauma. It also has provided a mechanism for coping with the three impediments defining the year 2020.

### **Strategies for Change**

Resilience served as the internal mechanism for recovery following my traumatization as a child and remains an essential coping strategy after experiencing secondary trauma triggered by George Floyd's death.

However, advocating for change within the criminal justice system and policing practices within the African American community is a more complex form of resilience. The timeline from my encounter, teenage years, college studies, and professional pursuits suggests that priority should be given to prevention by law enforcement authorities in their encounters with children. It begins with acknowledging the need for change and having a fundamental desire to change those systems designed to maintain the status quo.

In 1857, Frederick Douglass delivered his “West India Emancipation” speech at Canandaigua, New York. He argued, “Power concedes nothing. It never did; it never will” (Douglass 1857, p. 22). Typically, advocacy in the social work profession wrestles with decisions resulting from imbalances in power. The profile of clients does not include those with influence or access to resources. Social work advocacy supports the efforts by empowering clients with tools for enhanced lives. Yet this power dynamic is paralyzed by the magnitude of unfortunate encounters with those assigned to protect citizens. Douglass’ sentiments remain relevant today when it comes to systemic change within law enforcement. The role of community mobilization was to force these controlling systems to acknowledge the need for change. The obvious conclusion is that changes are needed to improve policing practices and community relations. Like the presumptions in the Ang (2021) research, it is reasonable to focus on the impact of police violence in the community where youth live. Attention should be given to the long-term effects, not only on those with direct exposure to that type of violence but also those in close proximity to the violent event (secondary trauma). Actual change that positions youth at the center of mediating violent engagements places that effort on an irreversible course toward improvement. The change will be intentional and will redirect the current series of traumatizing events in the communities.

Employing strategies to curve the trajectory of racial injustice within police departments can be accomplished in three ways: a focus on public policy, programmatic initiatives, and policing practice.

### **Public Policy**

Establishing sound public policy to facilitate change is not considered uncharted territory. The U.S. Department of Justice (2013), under the leadership of former Attorney General Eric Holder, published “Smart on Crime: Reforming the Criminal Justice System for the 21st Century.” All phases of the criminal justice system were examined, including charging, sentencing, incarceration, and reentry. This work considered demographic disparities, which identified patterns of unfairness. The 2013 Smart on Crime initiative acknowledged a need for change by identifying critical areas of concern to those most likely to experience violent encounters with police. The initiative resulted in action by the Justice Department and acknowledged the magnitude of encounters that mirrored my early experience. Also, it indirectly provided the urgency to develop ongoing strategies of resilience.

Smart on Crime forced the nation to acknowledge that there was something wrong. As a source of guidance, the resulting policies should work to ensure that the level of inquiry through research and evaluation is strategically initiated at every level of the criminal justice system within each State and local police department.

### **Programmatic Initiatives**

Another key strategy to deal with systemic racial injustice involves delivering programs that minimize reactive police practices while focusing on improved community relationships. Following the death of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery, the public outcry



was to defund the police. The demand pushed for the reallocation of funding directed toward services for communities of color. Lawmakers across the country are currently scrambling to respond to this urgent community demand. In Los Angeles, city officials cut \$150,000 from its police budget and redirected them toward community-based programs (City News Service, 2020). New York City's Mayor Bill de Blasio committed to slashing \$1 billion from the NYPD's budget and redirecting it to community programs (Wise, 2020).

Increased service activities within the community are a viable strategy for improving police and Black community relations. Programs that promote positive engagement can shift the attitudes and perceptions of police and Black youth within the community. Programs such as the Police Athletic League and other initiatives promote a mentoring focus on youth and attempt to create a harmonious coexistence. For example, the Oakland Police department launched the "OK" Program in 1990.

This initiative works with thousands of youths between the ages of 12-18. The program brings together police officers, school districts, and the faith-based community to transform lives and empower African American men and boys to improve their communities. (Oakland Police Department, 2021, About, History)

Community policing strategies may also promote organically derived solutions by conducting community engagement workshops. For example, I once conducted a youth-centered interactive workshop with the Atlanta Police. The purpose of the workshop was to develop better lines of communication between the police and Black youth. My workshop's portion centered on getting youth to identify potential solutions to end police brutality, racial profiling, and improve police and Black community relations. The youth recommended that we reverse the roles and allow them to train the officers on how to interact with them. This was indeed innovative thinking. Perhaps such an intervention following our family's encounter would have salvaged my trust in police or at least created an avenue to allow my voiced concerns to be heard.

Other essential programmatic strategies include the establishment of Community and Youth Advisory Boards, whose task can be to independently review complaints, make recommendations, and play an advocacy role on behalf of their communities.

## **Policing Practices**

Eliminating racial injustice with strategies such as community-based policing has its merits but also represents a paradigm shift for many officers who may see their role as exclusively policing, serving, and protecting. Buy-in from the affected communities is likely to require approaches where designed programs are implemented and evaluated in phases, homing in on the impact of the program on youth in the community.

One critical strategy for change in policing practices begins with recruiting from the communities they serve. Recruitment can be at local community colleges, churches, civic and fraternal organizations. Beyond local efforts, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are also a great recruitment source, as they have both undergraduate and graduate

criminal justice majors and other social science programs.

Also critical to the recruitment process of African American applicants is ensuring that the law enforcement representatives reflect the population they are recruiting. Increasing the African American law enforcement population will likely build trust within the community and promote cultural competency within the department. During my childhood encounter, there were no officers of color on the scene in any capacity. Leadership should also reflect the community in which it serves or at least promote diversity to reflect the spectrum of neighborhoods. Leadership sets the culture for the department, particularly leadership that reflects a strong and persistent belief in community policing and fair justice.

Community programs, such as Restorative Justice, offer principles for returning the community to the residents. According to Karmen (2015), these programs draw upon non-punitive methods of peacemaking, mediation, negotiation, dispute resolution, conflict management, and constructive engagement. This shift in philosophy can change policing approaches that have historically played out with tragic consequences in communities. For example, in my case, the initial officer on the scene successfully deescalated the domestic conflict. It was only when masses of officers arrived at the scene that collective aggression and use of force took place. This same type of aggressive encounter was played out in the George Floyd, Eric Garner, and Michael Brown incidents, just to name a few. It reasons that non-punitive (and non-deadly) approaches must be considered as an alternative.

### **Conclusion**

In sum, the protests and political and economic disruptions of 2020 have made visible the pleas for change. Changes in public policy, programmatic initiatives, and policing practices are critical for dismantling structural and institutional racism which creates the culture for police brutality and misconduct. These strategies hold law enforcement accountable and promote racial equity at every level within the criminal justice system.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Without question, George Floyd's death triggered a national and international uproar. For many Black youths, this incident, combined with the death of other Black youth at the hand of law enforcement, may have had lingering effects. Further research is needed to understand the impact of these repetitive images in social media on their attitudes toward law enforcement and the criminal justice system. Additionally, studies may focus on anticipated versus actual encounters with law enforcement to determine differences in stress and anxiety.

It is equally critical to explore Black parents' experiences talking with their children about law enforcement interactions. Is this talk anxiety-producing for both parent and child? Does the level of parental concern differ where there has been less exposure or fewer encounters with law enforcement?

Investigating resilience factors among youth reporting adverse encounters with law enforcement

is also a critically needed area of focus in research. Such a qualitative approach would provide a voice for youth and clarify the nature of their recovery.

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