

History hurts. But it can also heal.

Teaching police 400 years of Black history and culture

New and effective training exercises and rules have entered police training academies. Implicit bias and de-escalation of force training, intense community engagement, civilian violence interrupters, and procedural justice training - all valuable and all necessary but not sufficient. They lack the ability to address all of the issues regarding the policing of black and brown bodies. New York Times recently reported that police killings have not decreased since 2013 hovering each year at approximately 1100.

What more can be done in addition to stop hiring men and women who carry out their White supremacist ideology? Know history. Know culture. It is imperative that police know their own history and culture, of which they do not. It is equally important that police, indeed, all Americans, study Black history and culture. Without knowledge of history and culture, we know not who we are. We are all a product of our history and culture.

During the summer, people naturally come out of the house into our streets enjoying pleasant weather. With more people occupying sidewalks, streets, parks, street corners and communities, more interaction between citizens and police organically occurs. Before streets fill with more bad history on policing in our communities, let us pause to reflect on American history of policing Black communities.

Fair warning, **history hurts**. But, if we teach it “without anger or apology,” as Congressman John Lewis says, it can teach, liberate, rectify, empower, and, even heal. Teaching the hurtful history of police in the Black community is long overdue. But Washington, DC police are taking a bold leap into the future by going back into history. Students first learn about *Sankofa*, a peculiar, mythical bird in West Africa that walks forward along the beach looking backwards. *Sankofa* means “it is not taboo to go back and fetch what you lost.” DC police learn from the old African proverb that we cannot understand where we are and where we are going unless we know where we have been. “Know thy history, know thyself” says the proverb.

DC Police Study Black History and Culture:

Since 2018, we have taught 3800 sworn DC police officers, 660 civilians and a monthly

class of 25 new recruits. Class starts at 6:00 AM with a three hour lecture and discussion on 400 years of the African American history and culture. Particular emphasis is placed on the history of policing in Black communities. We then conduct a six hour tour of the National Museum of African American History and Culture. During the tour we use the NMAAHC collection to graphically examine Black people's experiences as it relates to policing in America.

New recruits study Black history for sixteen hours with a two-hour tour of a popular Black community named Shaw (Yes, named after Civil War Union Commander Robert Gould Shaw of the all-Black troops of the Massachusetts 54th), examining police brutality and culture in DC during the 1950s-1970s when the DC Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) was over 80% White and the city over 70% Black. What's wrong with that picture?

Police officers better understand the current moment they are mired in and are given space to engage in conversations about how to project a new future. We teach police that they cannot change history, but if they analyze their past, they can change their future.

History Hurts, but it can also Heal:

Make no mistake about it, the history of policing in America has not been a pretty picture. A truthful interpretation of our history is fraught with police being on the wrong side of history for over 310 years in Black communities. Historians have identified 1706 as the first slave patrols established around rice and tobacco plantations in Virginia and South Carolina to thwart run-away enslaved Africans. Thus, began the first police patrols targeting Black Americans*.

From then on, police were used to enforce *Slave Codes* in the Antebellum period to prevent Africans and African Americans from learning to read, marry, gather in groups more than three, possess tools that could be used as weapons and to prevent run-aways, revolts or rebellions. Southern military institutes, Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and The Citadel, were established, in 1839 and 1842 respectively, as paramilitary training centers to stop Black rebellions and runaways escaping to freedom as a result of the Nat Turner Rebellion in 1831.

Police were used after emancipation to enforce new *Black Codes*, laws that monitored and thwarted many Black aspirations for equality and justice in their new freedoms after slavery. Black Codes enforced by police locked Black men, women and children into

penitentiaries to be leased-out as convicts to cut sugar cane, pick cotton, build levees and clear and drain swamps to establish massive cotton and sugar cane plantations in the Deep South as well as in industries like mining and manufacturing. Their labor was expropriated to make profits for the rich few. These convict-lease systems were the beginning of mass incarceration begun in the 1870s that continues today, a result of over-surveillance and over-policing Black communities imaging Black youth as “super-predators”. No wonder the Great Migration brought six-million African Americans to northern cities between 1895-1970. This is how DC became the first majority Black American city in 1955.

In many cases, police were used to support the lynching of 4,743 Black people from 1877 - 1968. Many police wore law enforcement uniforms during the day and Ku Klux Klan regalia at night. During the Modern Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1975, police were used to terrorize and halt civil rights activists from petitioning for equality and voting rights. Exhibits at the NMAAHC tell these stories poignantly.

Which brings us to today. Stop and Frisk, police shootings of unarmed Black people, enforcing drugs laws that target Blacks and ignore a larger more hidden drug use and abuse in white communities, police have been on the wrong side of history targeting Black people and over-criminalizing them. And people wonder why Freddie Gray ran away from police when they approached him in Baltimore in 2015 or why 19-year old Anton Black ran away from police in Caroline County, Maryland in 2018. Both were apprehended after a foot race and killed by police thereafter.

400 years!

400 years of a socio-economic-political system based on White privilege, White supremacy and racial targeting and hatred has led to two Americas, one White the other Black, propped up by a militaristic-police state. In this system the disparities of health, housing, education and wealth are staggering. COVID-19 has again “pulled the mask off” the notion of “equal justice for all.” Black people are dying at three times the rate of Whites while the president of the United States goes golfing with no mask during the pandemic. White wealth today is \$171,000 on average per household while Black wealth is \$17,500. White median income is \$71,000, Black median income is \$41,000. What’s wrong with this picture? In Washington, DC in 2019, White household wealth is \$284,000. Black household wealth is \$3500. Something is terribly wrong.

Black men in particular have been viewed in our White supremacist society as predators to be hunted down from day-one since they arrived on the shores of Point Comfort, Virginia in 1619, 401 years ago. Driving while Black in the suburbs, napping

while Black in a college lounge, walking your dog while Black in a gentrified neighborhood, sipping coffee too-long while Black in a cafe and shopping while Black anywhere in the USA can and will get the police called on you for being - well - Black. Recently, a white lady called the police on a Black birdwatcher in Central Park for requesting her dog be leashed in an area of the park clearly marked by signs saying "Leash Your Dog."

We have been watching in horror two more Black men killed by a Brunswick, Georgia retired police vigilante and Minneapolis police smothering a Black man with his knee while hand-cuffed calling out "I can't breathe." A Black woman was murdered by police breaking into her apartment in the middle of the night on a drug raid. No drugs found! Where have we heard the above before? George Floyd is the modern-day Emmett Till. After Emmett Till was lynched in Mississippi in 1955 and his battered body was displayed in photos for the world to see what White supremacy look like, the Modern Civil Rights Movement was born. After George Floyd's murder was displayed in video for the world to see in 2020, the Modern Economic Rights Movement must be born because we are all in this together. Over-policing of Black and Brown peoples and its brutality is a result of a rigged economic system 400 years in the making. Time's up.

DC MPD Helping to lead into the future of policing:

Today, MPD teaches the above is over-policing. MPD, like other big city police forces, endured a decade of a *Consent Decree* by the US Justice Department to get its policing in order. MPD is the first police force in America to adopt this training curriculum. Understanding our history and our culture leads directly to a better understanding of implicit biases, knee-jerk escalation of force, and the distrust of police in the Black community. History hurts. But history can also heal if we are willing to face the truth and confront its reality. As James Baldwin said, "Not everything faced changes, but nothing is changed without being faced." MPD is facing its history and a culture of male-toxicity and violence in Black communities.

MPD has been a leader in police training since 1869 when it became the first police force in America to hire African American officers. In 1948, MPD was first to create civilian reviews listening to citizen complaints. MPD was one of the first police forces to embrace the concept of "community policing" in the early 1970s led by a young upstart in the Shaw community named Marion Barry who forced an honest dialogue between police and the Black community starting in 1969. Barry began these dialogues with Roger Wilkins, Assistant Attorney General, in President Johnson's Justice Department in the mid-sixties. DC was an innovative hub for community policing.

In 1978, DC was the first major-city to appoint an African American police chief, Burtell Jefferson. By the 1980s, while Marion Barry, the first Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, was mayor of DC, MPD led the country in hiring and promoting Black, Hispanic, women, gay & lesbian, and Muslim police officers. MPD trains police for hours in implicit bias and de-escalation of force. The DC police force, majority minority, looks like our city population. They wear locks, beards, head scarves and rainbow badges on their uniform. They are every color, shape and size. Women are 27% of the force. They are stepping up their own insight into how and why some members of the Black community distrust them. Fortunately, most people join MPD today to “do the right thing” and be of service to their community.

MPD is considered by criminal justice experts as the best big-city police agency in America. Remember May 12, 2017, the mayhem that occurred by the Klan and Neo-Nazis demonstrating for White supremacy in Charlottesville, Virginia? When they came to DC a year later on that anniversary, the whole wide world was watching our police force and how it handled those Klansmen/Nazis and 40,000 DC protesters against them. On that day the world watched the DC police force perform brilliantly permitting everyone to have their First Amendment Rights honored with no violence. *The Washington Post* opined afterwards that MPD showed the world what “smart policing” looks like.

Attending this training have been police officers and trainers from as far away as Sacramento, California and Denver, Colorado, and as close as the FBI, the US Capitol and Hyattsville and Cleverly, Md. Recently, police trainers from Arlington County, Va. and Anne Arundel County, Md. took our course to adopt it to their police force training sessions. Currently, we are training the US Secret Service and the police academy trainers in the State of Washington at the Criminal Justice Training Center. We have also trained LAPD’s full command staff in LA.

On the side of each MPD squad car is their work motto: “*We are here to help.*” Interaction with our MPD men and women for intense and tough dialogues and on dozens of night shift ride-alongs, has given us a deep appreciation of just how *curious and engaged* our police force really is. We have seen grown men cry during tours of the NMAAHC and in class discussing their past and coming to grips that they are saddled with this untoward history. History, like their equipment belt, hangs heavy on them.

History does hurt, but if taught appropriately, it can also teach, liberate, rectify, empower and heal. Summer is here. We will be out and about. Let’s make good history, not bad history. Now’s the time for police and their unions to march with protestors chanting an “End to police brutality” and “No justice, No peace.”

*References: Mitchell and Davies, *Encyclopedia of Black Arts Movement*, 2019; Bellesiles, Michael, *Violence and Brutality in American History*, 1999; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 1845; Loewen, James, *Lies Across America - What our historic sites get wrong*, 2013; Stanley, Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Laws 1850-1860*, 1970; and Hadden, Sally, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas*, 2001.

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