

In Wake Of George Floyd's Death, Psychologist Reexamines Racial Bias In Policing

June 05, 2020

The back-to-back deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor have spurred protests across the country.

Taylor, a 26-year-old black woman, was [shot multiple times](#) by Louisville Metro Police Department officers after they forced their way inside her home. The officer who arrested Floyd, a 46-year-old black man, was videotaped [kneeling on Floyd's neck](#) for multiple minutes before Floyd died.

The current moment raises serious questions about the future of policing, how bias affects police work, and the mistrust many communities of color feel toward the police.

Stanford University's [Dr. Jennifer Eberhardt](#), author of "[Biased: Uncovering the Hidden Prejudice That Shapes What We See, Think, and Do](#)," has worked extensively with police officers on racial bias.

With a team of researchers, Eberhardt found there is a dehumanizing factor that plays a role in the psychological association between race and crime, not only in police interactions but in criminal court cases as well.

She and other researchers discovered "the association between African Americans and crime is so powerful that just thinking about violent crime can lead people to focus their attention on black faces," she says.

In the study, when police officers are shown an image of a white person's face and a black person's face, the black person's face is "much more likely to draw their attention when those officers are prompted to think of shooting, apprehending, capturing or arresting," she says.

Eberhardt works with law enforcement to design [implicit bias trainings](#). Her program was made available to police departments across California after being created in conjunction with the police departments in Oakland and Stockton.

But even with training, incidents of racial bias still happen.

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For example, her team of Stanford researchers worked with a task force in the Oakland Police Department to reduce the number of stops they were making of people not committing any serious crime, she says.

"We settled on a simple approach to reducing stops, and that was to push officers to ask themselves a question before each and every stop they make," she says. "And that question was, 'Is this stop

intelligence-led, yes or no?’ And what they mean by intelligence-led is, ‘Do I have prior information that ties this particular person to a specific crime?’ ”

Adding that checkbox made a “huge difference” in Oakland, Eberhardt says. In 2017, Oakland officers made roughly 32,000 stops. But after implementing that question in 2018, officers made about 19,000 stops.

“African American stops alone fell by over 43%,” she says. “And that drop happened even as the crime rate continued to fall.”

The findings imply racial bias can’t be eliminated — but it can be managed.

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“We can use evidence-based approaches to improve police-community interactions and to maintain justice,” she says. “And we’ve seen these approaches make a difference in Oakland, California. And we’ve also seen other promising approaches that are being tried across the country.”