

Hands up—Don't shoot: Police shooting of young Black males: Implications for social work and human services

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ABSTRACT

Police shootings of young Black males that ultimately result in their death have become an all-too-common occurrence in this country. The deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Gardner have highlighted police relations with this population. Before viable solutions can be established, a number of areas need to be addressed that relate to the historical context in which police relations with this group exist that impact current relations between the police and young Black males, why their lives are seemingly given less value by society than those of their White counterparts, the role that spirituality and religiosity play that may help to make connections between them and the police, and the benefit of the Black church in fostering amicable police relations with young Black males. This article addresses these issues and concludes with recommendations for how the social work and human services professions, along with the Black church and police, can be responsive and proactive in addressing this social problem.

KEYWORDS

Black church; Black males; police shooting; spirituality; violence

Wherever there is a human being, I see God-given rights inherent in that being, whatever may be the sex or complexion.—William Lloyd Garrison (2010)

In the aftermath of a police shooting of yet another unarmed Black teenager, the United States is presently witnessing one of the largest public protests and outpourings of social activism since the Civil Rights Movement. Police shootings of young Black males that ultimately result in their death have become an all too common occurrence in this country. Most recently on August 9, 2014, the shooting death of Michael Brown, an unarmed Black teenager by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri, and the consequent public outcry caused a rustling effect across the nation. Staggering statistics are superfluous regarding unarmed young Black males who have died as a result of being shot by police officers in this country. For instance, Gabrielson, Jones, and Sagara (2014) reported that between 1980 and 2012, of the 41 teens age 14 and younger killed by police, 27 were Black, eight were White, four were Hispanic, and only one was Asian. On average, Blacks killed by police were 30 years of age compared to 35 for Whites (Gabrielson et al., 2014). The chances of a young Black male being killed by police are 21 times greater than their White counterpart. Furthermore, between 2010 and 2012, young Black males between ages 15 and 19 were killed by police at a rate of 31.17 per million, compared to only 1.47 per million White males in that same age range (Harris, 2014).

Since its inception, the United States has obligated itself to “uniting” all citizens by granting human rights to all who reside here. According to the Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Charters of Freedom, [n.d.](#))

It is troubling that not all citizens have a right to a full and opportune life. In light of the lethal history between U.S. police and young Black males and the recent deaths of unarmed Black males by police, an exigent call has gone out by many for solutions to address this problem (Ghitis, 2014). Before viable solutions can be established, a number of questions beg answers. Among them are the following: In what historical context do police relations with this group exist and how does that context impact current police relations with this population? Why are the lives of young Black males seemingly given less value by society than their White counterparts? What role does spirituality and religiosity play in the lives of young Black males in helping to make connections between them and the police? How is the Black church beneficial and strategically important in fostering amicable relations between the police and young Black males? Finally, what can the social work and human services professions do to be responsive and proactive to this social problem? The authors of this article do not propose to have all of the answers to these inquiries but address these questions in an effort to increase the knowledge base about this social problem and to assist social workers, law enforcement agencies, and other helping professionals in their efforts to reduce if not eradicate the prevalence of this phenomenon.

Who are young Black males and what are their life experiences?

It is important to note that young Black males are diverse in ethnicity, sexuality, attitudes, and disposition but are unified by a socially constructed category based on their skin tone, place of ancestral origin, and their collective American experiences. The United States Census Bureau defines “Black” as a person having origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa (US Census, 2011). This typically includes people of African American heritage (Blacks in America with ties to slave ancestry from Sub-Saharan Africa) as well as immigrants from Sub-Saharan African countries and Afro-Caribbean countries. For the purpose of this study, the authors borrow from lifespan developmental theorists and define young Black males as being those between the ages of 13 and 40. This time frame is crucial for them because it is in this period that they develop a personal identity, form intimate loving relationships, and begin to make significant contributions to society through a career and family formation (Erikson, 1959; Uzzell, 2008).

The role of the Black male in America has been constructed through history from the early periods of slavery. Black males were stripped of their identity and classified as subhuman/servant/owned, thereby reducing their status to property (Kitano, 1985). Black males were subjected to harsh tactics to make them submissive as a means of maintaining social control (Majors & Gordon, 1994). According to Majors and Gordon, the power and status of Black males in their families were taken away from them, and in most cases their families were removed as well. Ultimately the Black male was identified as only fit for working and breeding. The post-slavery era has seen some rights restored to Blacks males, yet many of the institutions and the ideologies that govern them have not changed. Young Black males’ inclusion into mainstream society is often viewed as a privilege, not a right, accorded by the Constitution. This may be because the Constitution was not written to protect young Black males nor were social institutions mandated to protect them.

Their culture is viewed as substandard, and they are required to adapt to Eurocentric cultural institutions if they dare to be part of U.S. society. They commonly wrestle with divergent ascribed societal definitions. To the greater degree they have been pejoratively defined as one or more of the following:

A Gangsta—A “gansta” is a child who grew up in an arduous environment. He was generally exposed to traumatic events during his childhood, most of them violent. He has often lost many of his family members and close friends to violence and is struggling to keep what is important to him in the only way he knows how (violence or crime). Generally this person was never given a chance to succeed because of early circumstances that were out of his influence (Payne, 2006).

A Thug—He is a child dedicated to gathering the attention of those around him, with multiple shows of bravado. He will sometimes perform minor acts of theft and will often try to mimic the actions and words of other thugs seen in music videos. He may live in the inner city or suburbs but will refuse to participate in any hard-core criminal activity (Anderson et al., 2003).

A Traitor—Often known as an “Oreo.” This is any young Black male who after showing signs of intelligence is willing to pursue his potential as an intellectual human being. He will speak using correct grammar and will enjoy reading and learning. He has sometimes shown tendencies of hatred toward those of his own skin color due to previous ridicule (Swanigan, 2012).

A Martyr—He may make reference to how Black people are still enslaved by White people, blaming every non-Black person for anything that goes wrong in his life. He often makes requests for reparations for slavery and assures people of his hatred for “The Man.” He continues to make radical statements calling for mass acts of violence or the refusal to eat certain foods (Marable, 1998).

A Vagrant—Upon realizing the paradoxes in all the previously stated paths, this man has chosen to do what he wants. He will often spend hours in thought on the question of “Who am I?” (Cooper, 2013).

Many Black youth feel that the privileges that characterize a typical youth of White middle-class family background in the United States are unobtainable (Staples, 1982). Staples added that, at the very onset of teenage life, young Black males are more likely to have encounters with the justice system that negatively impact their quality of life in both the short and long term. They are also more likely to be incarcerated because of disproportionate policies and practices of law enforcement that target Black males (Warde, 2012). Young Black males are likely to be concentrated in urban areas, be high school dropouts, have a high unemployment rate, and experience social and often physical isolation that negatively impacts them socially and economically (Majors & Gordon, 1994). The collective impact of these factors places them at a disadvantage in relation to their White counterparts and other young males of different races. For instance, the unemployment rate for young Black males continues to be significantly higher than their peers. According to the Department of Labor in October 2014, the national unemployment rate of people 16 years of age was 5.8%, yet Blacks were at 10.9% compared to Whites at 4.8%, Asians (not seasonally adjusted) at 5.0%, and Hispanics at 6.8% (Bureau of Labor Statistics: U.S. Department of Labor, 2014).

Regardless of how society views this population, young Black males offer a unique perspective (Mcdaniel, Diprete, Buchmann, & Shwed, 2011). Moreover, although the pressure to thrive while grappling with their life circumstances makes young Black males very susceptible to depressive symptoms (Whooley et al., 2002) they demonstrate a level of resilience belied by popular beliefs (Mcdaniel et al., 2011). Despite living in a system of inequities, young Black males shed stereotypes and cultural pathology, all despite still not being understood. Hence, this group is extremely resilient and has an ability to thrive, excel, and exist in a culture that is biased against them. Most live productive lives, have great strength and survival skills, and go on to make meaningful contributions to society in spite of the challenges they face.

Their presence is invaluable, and they make unique inputs to the nation and to the world. Young Black males serve in the military, and just like their peers of other races they make life sacrifices to defend their country. They serve as frontline workers in various professions, as employees and business owners, as doctors and engineers, community activists, politicians, and teachers, among others. There is no doubt that young Black males have excelled in a plethora of areas and that their impact has resonated throughout society. Successful young Black males positively impact the general public socially and economically. As athletes, they are responsible for generating billions of dollars annually in television advertisements and the sale of athletic

wear and through the overall profits of college and professional athletics that pay the salaries of owners, coaches, support staff, and administrators of university sports and professional franchises. As entertainers, they pay for the services of agents, musical accompanists, lawyers, and many other people who work in this arena, and collectively, as business entrepreneurs who make billions of dollars, they contribute to the salaries of employees and others who help run their businesses (Evans, 2006). They have made substantial impacts to the world's cultural landscape through music and the clothing industry by setting trends and creating styles. Perhaps the most valuable role that they play in society is that of role models and leaders to the next generation of young Black males. It is therefore crucial for the benefit of this nation and society at large that young Black males be given the fundamental rights of other young males. They have continually proven that they have the capability and capacity to succeed if given the opportunity to do so (Bimper, Harrison, & Clark, 2013; McGee & Martin, 2011).

What follows next is a discussion of the historical context in which police relations with young Black males exist and how this has impacted current police relations with this population.

The historical context of police relations with African American males

Slave Patrols and Night Watchers were instituted during the era of slavery to control the movement and behavior of slaves (Kappeler, 2014). The first Slave Patrol was said to have been established in 1704 with the purpose of stopping any form of slave revolt (Nelson, 2000). These patrollers were made up of adult White males who walked the streets to monitor slaves. These practices became widespread throughout the nation and especially in southern states. They were also sanctioned by state laws such as those enacted in Virginia in 1705 that allowed for whipping and mutilation by slaveholders as punishment for crimes committed by slaves and the 1723 Maryland law that allowed Africans who struck a White person to be punished by having their ear cut off (Nelson, 2000).

The Reconstruction Era that followed the Civil War did not see a reduction in the violence against African American males. It is argued that the plight of young Black males actually worsened, especially in southern states, as vigilante groups and lynch mobs attacked African Americans with fewer external constraints from law enforcement and local governments. These former Confederate governments did not provide protection for African Americans, and in some situations, they created a nonprotective environment by passing a series of "Black Codes" that economically and socially disenfranchised African Americans (Nelson, 2000). In some instances, police joined local White mobs to attack Black communities. For instance, a congressional investigation into the summer of 1917 mob attacks and killings of Black residents in East St. Louis revealed that the local police participated (Nelson, 2000). These acts of violence continued into late 19th century even as formal police forces began to emerge in various cities and counties in the United States (Sidney, 1983).

At the turn of the century into the early 20th century, police brutalities began to incite public riots as other segments of society began to organize to fight against what was seen as injustice. It is estimated that from 1882 to 1930 roughly 3,000 African Americans (mostly males) were lynched (Fritzgerald, 2007). Lynching became a common punishment given to those who challenged the oppressive culture. It was also used as a tool to draw a color line between Black and White males. When Black males were accused of raping White women, they were typically hanged by mobs with their genitals mutilated as a public statement to maintain color lines. However, when a Black woman reported having been raped by a White man, he usually was not persecuted or punished. The governmental judicial institutions that include the police and the courts were constructed by default to enforce such oppressive acts toward Black males. Predominantly all White police forces, juries, and government officials usually resulted in the incrimination of young Black males and the acquittal of White counterparts for the same crime. As a result, despite historic accounts of White men sexually assaulting Black females, 90% of persons in the United States convicted of rape from 1930 to 1976 and executed were Black men (Fritzgerald, 2007).

Throughout this period, many young Black men served the United States military only to face a malicious culture that treated them as second-class citizens. For instance, in the summer of 1917, in the city of Houston, Texas, a group of White policemen assaulted and arrested two Black servicemen of the Third Battalion of the Twenty-Fourth Infantry for not obeying Jim Crow laws (Shapiro, 1988). By the end of the 1930s, grassroots organizations like the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and the NAACP had intensified their campaign against lynching and drawn international attention to the issue. Yet this period also marked the expansion of urban policing, which coincided with increased reports of police brutality across the nation.

Brutality against young Black males by police has continued into the 21st century. There now exists a systemic culture of oppression and marginalization of them that transcends all socio-economic classes and permeates every social institution (excluding their families and the African American church) including law enforcement (Cornileus, 2012). As a result, young Black males are profiled as criminals, deviant, unapproachable, and to be greatly feared. This profile often is a determinant to how they are treated by police (Bell, Hopson, Craig, & Robinson, 2014; Hutchinson, 1996) as evidenced by 1999 shootings of Amadou Diallo in New York City, whose body was riddled with 19 bullets by four police officers for resembling a serial rapist while he was standing in front of his house (Cooper, 1999); in 2000, Richard L. Holtz, a naked unarmed murder suspect who was killed with a barrage of 27 bullets in a motel hallway for allegedly threatening six police officers (McFadden, 2000); and Ousmane Zongo, age 43, who in 20013 was confronted and killed by a police officer in New York City during a raid on a counterfeit-CD ring in which Zongo was not involved. Relatives of Mr. Zongo sued the city and were awarded \$3 million. The judge in the trial of the officer who shot him (and was convicted of criminally negligent homicide but did not serve jail time) said he was “insufficiently trained, insufficiently supervised and insufficiently led” (Brick & Confessor, 2006). In 2006, Sean Bell, an unarmed 23-year-old New York City man scheduled to be married later that day, died in an onslaught of 50 bullets fired by a group of five police officers who believed that he had a gun. He had been celebrating his upcoming wedding with two friends.

According to a Department of Justice report (2011), six days after Hurricane Katrina, James Brissette, age 17, and Ronald Madison, age 40, a mentally ill person, were killed for no apparent reason by police officers on Danziger Bridge in New Orleans; Eric Garner (2014), age 43, died from being choked by a New York police officer for allegedly selling untaxed, loose cigarettes, with the officers subsequently not indicted by a grand jury for his death, and John Crawford III, age 22, was shot and killed in a Beavercreek, Ohio, Walmart while holding a toy air rifle that he had just picked up from a shelf (*Washington Post*, 2014). These killings result in mistrust of the police by members of the African American community and in particular leave negative feelings toward police among many young Black males (Britton, 2000; Freyer, 2014). Kappeler (2014) asserted that modern U.S. police departments’ foundational roots and driving ideologies are influenced by slave era policies. It is therefore not erroneous to assume that police do not always exercise enforcement and justice uniformly with all groups in this society, and young Black males are among those who often become victims of such injustice compared to young White males.

We now consider spirituality and religiosity as a buffer against a person’s ability to kill another.

Spirituality in the African American community and in the lives of young people

Spirituality is a distinct but confluent domain of human life. Burkhardt (1989, p. 72), who published the first formal concept analysis of spirituality, defined spirituality or “spiriting” as a process of “unfolding the mystery through harmonious interconnectedness that springs from inner strength.” All persons have a physical, social, psychological, emotional, and spiritual dimension that collectively make up the total self (Agullar, 1997). Spirituality gives a person a sense that there is something greater than self and helps an individual understand that they are not the center of the universe, but rather inextricably connected to all other humans (Alexander & Moore, 2008).

Historically, spirituality has been at the center of African American community life and folk experience (Billingsley & Caldwell, 1991; Taylor & Chatters, 1991) and is a prominent component of African American culture because it permeates nearly every domain of African American life. Spirituality has and still serves as a personal and communal source of liberation, solace, hope, meaning, and forgiveness as it relates to social, political, and economic injustices (Mattis, 2002).

African Americans have used their spiritual convictions to subvert White, racist, and patriarchal hegemony; construct subjectively meaningful personal, racial, and gender identities; agitate for social justice; and maintain a sense of community (Long, 1997). Researchers who examined the role of spirituality in the lives of young people have found that among adolescents, spirituality promotes personal well-being and mitigates against negative behaviors and outcomes. In their work with a sample of sixth-grade, urban African American youth, Jagers and Mock (1993) found that a spiritual orientation was associated with fewer reported acts of delinquency and with an increased focus on such prosocial values as cooperation, empathy, and justice. Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, and Davis (2002) have found that African American adolescent males who hear, and presumably internalize, messages about spirituality tend to engage in greater levels of anger control and fewer acts of overt aggression than their counterparts. These findings suggest that spirituality plays a crucial role in promoting prosocial attitudes and behaviors among African American youth. Spirituality has also been found to promote personal well-being and mediate negative outcomes for African American adults.

The social sciences and American society as a whole have viewed African Americans in unacceptably simplistic ways, and research on the role of spirituality in the lives of African Americans among the social sciences has remained limited and disjointed. There is very little appreciation that the African American community comprises people of myriad cultures, ideologies, attitudes, and experiences. This has contributed to an ambivalent and simplistic approach to the study of African American religiosity and spirituality. Thus, the question that remains and needs to be addressed is why social work has done a poor job in studying the role of spirituality in the lives of African Americans. This is a crucial question because it provides researchers an opportunity to study social work's treatment of African American people relative to their spiritual life. The question also calls for researchers to examine the ways in which the field of social work must reposition itself if it is to do an effective job of examining African American life and appropriately responding to the chasm that exists between law enforcement and young Black males.

The interface of religiosity and police shootings of young Black males

For the current study, the authors' conceptualization of religion subscribes to the three-dimensional (organizational, nonorganizational, and subjective religiosity) domains of religion among African Americans posited by Taylor, Mattis, and Chatters (1999). Therefore, from the aforementioned three dimensions of religious involvement, the authors succinctly define religiosity among African Americans as the voluntary membership and regular participation within a formal religious group (church, mosque, or temple), coupled with a personalized practice of religious rituals (meditations, prayers, scripture reading, etc.) and strict adherence to religious values and perceptions. It is therefore not surprising that many studies have reported that compared to other races, African Americans have higher participation rates, allegiance, and social connectedness to religious organizations, otherwise called the Black church (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Moore & Collins, 2002; Moore, 2011; Taylor et al., 1999; Williams, Griffith, Young, Collins, & Dodson, 1999).

Mattis (2002, p. 101) additionally affirmed that among African Americans, "religiosity is associated with organized worship." Furthermore, being religious has been identified as the medium, or conduit, for expressing one's spirituality (Frazier & Hansen, 2009; Mattis, 2002). Undeniably, organized religion has been identified as one of the major bastions of African Americans. For this study, the authors contend that the spirituality (a micro-, or private, perspective) and religiosity (a macro-, or formally organized, perspective) of young Black

males provides ample interventional support to address the challenges of police shooting and law enforcement brutality to which young Black males are disproportionately exposed.

We now examine the role of the Black church in reducing police violence against young Black males.

The Black church's involvement in violence reduction against young Black males

For young Black males perennially exposed to police shooting and brutality, the Black church has been pinpointed as an indispensable institution that enhances positive youth development and “develop[s] a moral compass for adulthood” (Williams, 2003, p. 20), provides collective coping (Constantine, Donnelly, & Myers, 2002), offers a center for a sense of control and a place to reduce violence-related strains and stresses (Jang & Johnson, 2003, 2004), and above all serves as a mediator, or go-between, between the police and young Black males (Braga, Hureau, & Winship, 2008; Brunson, Braga, Hureau, & Pegram, 2014). Conversely, studies have reported that police officers utilize religious coping mechanisms to overcome critical stress incidents such as minority distrust and occupational hazards (Clark-Miller & Brady, 2013; Morash, Haarr, & Kwak, 2006). Therefore, a partnership and reciprocal professional relationship exist between some members of the clergy and police.

More specifically, the partnership of Black church leaders and police departments in Boston (such as “police-clergy neighborhood walks” in the famous “Operation Ceasefire” or “Boston Miracle” of the 1990s) also undergirds the important role that the Black church can play in reducing shooting violence that affects young Black males (Braga et al., 2008, p. 171). In the wake of the recent police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Banks (2014) reported that signatures of African American church leaders were collected to jointly release press statements condemning the police shooting of yet another young Black male. The Banks (2014) report also indicated that Black church leaders encouraged the African American community to financially support Michael Brown’s family in defraying the legal expenses of prosecuting the case.

It is, therefore, not surprising to observe that the mobilization, organization, and restoration roles that Black churches have continued to provide from the era of slavery to today persist among African Americans (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990; Moore, 1991, 2011; Williams et al., 1999). Literature addresses the many religiously driven interventions to address social problems that assail young Black males. For instance, Adedoyin and Salter (2013) chronicled vital roles played by Black churches in addressing suicidal-shooting-related incidents and prevention strategies among young Blacks. In addition, the Black church was featured prominently in working with police departments nationwide to mitigate the problem of youth violence and gangsterism (Brunson, et al., 2014; Marsal, 2009). It is not uncommon to observe a working partnership between the leadership of the Black church and law enforcement agencies to reduce violence. What follows are recommendations for reducing police shootings of young Black males. These prescribed proposals are intended to help police, members of the Black church, and social workers address this issue.

Recommendations for violence reduction by police in relation to young Black males

The following recommendations are made in an effort to provide viable proactive measures that can be used to decrease the likelihood of lethal encounters between police and young Black males:

- (1) *Cultural Sensitivity Training*—The United States is now an extremely diverse place occupied by people who have differing cultural backgrounds. Culture includes the shared collective worldview, language, foods, music, art forms, religious traditions, styles of communication, and modes of dress and body postures of a group that must be experienced to be fully appreciated. Having a theoretical knowledge of cultural differences is not enough. Culture must be experienced within the context of a particular people. Obtaining a law enforcement

degree usually requires a suite of courses that include the introduction and overview of the criminal justice system, theories of crime and punishment, and an introduction to the courts and correctional system. Other requirements may include elective and specialized courses in ethics, law enforcement operations, capital punishment, violent crime, and domestic violence. In many degree programs, internships are not part of the degree requirement (Stephenson, 2012; Werth, 2011). Hence, police can graduate from a law enforcement degree program without ever having hands-on community experience prior to being employed in law enforcement. This has often proven problematic or even deadly because “rookie” police sometimes enter a community and engage with individuals about whom they have little to no cultural understanding (Stephenson, 2012; Taiping, 1997). The authors investigated national law enforcement curricula and found no courses on spirituality among academic programs. This is an important point because, as previously stated, embracing spirituality enables a person to make the link between themselves and others. Perhaps the incidence of police shootings of unarmed young Black males would be positively impacted if during their academic preparation police were taught the value of being spiritually related to others. It is hoped that the culture of fear and disdain of young Black males (Brunson & Weitzer, 2009) would begin to dissipate among many within the ranks of law enforcement as a result of the introduction of courses on spirituality within law enforcement core curricula. The ultimate goal of exposing police to courses on spirituality would be to help them connect to the humanity of young Black males, which may cause them to be less likely to use deadly force in situations where it is not warranted such as when a male is not armed.

Social work is a profession that is concerned with the well-being of all people and especially those who are vulnerable and oppressed. Social workers can provide cultural immersion experiences specific to the life experiences and needs of young Black males as part of law enforcement training with the hope of changing negative perceptions that some police have about young Black males. They can also facilitate round table discussions between the African American community and police department officials and officers on police policies regarding the use of deadly force. This will provide education for community residents on policing procedures, policies, and strategies and will also provide a forum for discussions on how police interact with young African American males and alternative ways for police to interact with this population in their patrol areas. It must be noted that not all social workers who take diversity training are experts on relating to or knowledgeable enough about young Black males to provide in-depth cultural diversity training to police. The authors suggest that only those who have a working knowledge about young Black males are positioned to educate others.

- (2) *Enhanced Law Enforcement Curricula*—Law enforcement curricula should include courses on protecting human rights and understanding cultural bias which can be taught to police by social workers. Police should also be required to take mandatory annual continuing education courses on the use of deadly force within the African American community. These courses will hopefully encourage police to recognize biases they may have when policing young African American males. A focus of the continuing education will be to teach alternative methods of policing within the African American community.
- (3) *Proactive Intervention Strategies*—It is incumbent upon African American churches to take a proactive role by specifically targeting to young Black males’ topics such as police relations and appropriate cordial responses to law enforcement personnel when encounters occur. Those discussions can occur during sermons, Bible study, and other forums. As indicated earlier in the Boston study, intentionally building bridges between African American churches and police departments has been shown to improve relationships and reduce violence. Second, proactive programs (not when a crisis occurs such as the Ferguson case) involving police officers and young Black males should be organized to better acquaint young

Black males with police departments. Additionally, it is proposed that representatives or leaders among young Black males participate in community policing training provided by the local police department so that these males can pass on the information they learn to successive generations of young Black males. Similarly, it is suggested that police officers occasionally attend youth programs that are sponsored by and/or located in Black churches and neighborhood programs to understand changing community dynamics, current frustrations, and agreed-upon suggestions made by the community to address potential issues (LaMotte et al., 2010).

- (4) *Utilizing Indigenous Helpers*—The establishment of networks of representative young Black male leaders, throughout the Black community, who would serve as intermediaries between the police and young Black males could prove beneficial. They could be equipped with Twitter, Facebook, a mobile help line, or other instant messaging devices that a distressed young Black male can call immediately when altercations, confrontations, or pursuit ensue that involve them and police officers. This instant messaging, or communication, can then be relayed by the young leader to a trusted police officer who can instantly reassure colleagues (or in the case of the police, they can call this intermediary to mediate) before a shooting or fatal actions are carried out. Although these points are not guarantees, they may at least close the current relational gaps between young Black males and police and offer a structured and available bridge that can be crossed in the event of a crisis situation that may deteriorate into a shooting.
- (5) *Police Civility*—Police officers should work to be friendlier when patrolling the Black community. Greeting members of the community with a simple “hello” or stopping to have a spontaneous conversation with people who live in the Black community may produce favorable feeling toward officers. In a community, such as Ferguson, Missouri, and many others, where there has been a history of tension between officers and residents, this kind of police civility is important. Genuine and kind gestures can be pathways for changing negative perceptions among members of the Black community about police. Even in situations where police officers have to engage in stopping people, being courteous or considerate can offset the police disrespect many young Black males experience. Wadman and Ziman (1993) found that when police officers are civil and courteous, it can strengthen their interaction with those in the community and will be reciprocated. Essentially, the initial approach of officers toward young Black males needs to reflect a nonoffensive tone of voice and language and a show of respect. With some encounters police officers have with young Black males there might not be the possibility for such greetings and friendly tones, but it should be something they consider as a matter of practice. It is critical for police officers to appreciate that as crime or the fear of crime decreases in a community, favorable attitudes toward the police increase (Cao, Frank, & Cullen, 1996). Therefore, attention should also be given to the broader systemic issues that young Black males face. For example, as low-income communities are often conducive to crime (Websdale, 2001), improvement in the economic condition of its residents (which includes young Black males) could have an impact on the reduction of violence, and thus police-citizen relationships may improve.

Implications for social work practice and education

The authors raise a number of implications for social work education and practice given the media attention that current highly publicized police shootings have garnered. In regard to social work education, families and friends of victims of police shootings require a number of services to cope with the death of a loved one. Traditionally, social work programs offer courses on death, dying, and bereavement. These programs teach various interventions for clients who are coping with the death

of a loved one; however, the tragic and untimely death of a young Black male at the hands of police officers raises other issues. This type of death presents a unique set of problems because of the constant media attention and the public debates that often occur surrounding the shooting, and if a trial ensues it is often highly publicized, as is the verdict. Consequently, media attention can lead to friends and families constantly reliving the tragic event over and over, thus compounding their grief. Additionally, social work programs that include a specialization in school social work should be at the forefront of grief education because faculty who teach these courses are primary in teaching social work students how to provide therapy to classmates of the shooting victims. Overall, the constant media attention surrounding police shootings underscore the need for social work educators to address this reoccurring social problem across the social work curriculum and to prepare social work students for the challenges faced by such deaths.

Due to the complexity of challenges facing Black males, and the interdependent nature of social and educational systems, efforts to improve educational, social, and political outcomes for these young men must be collaborative, entailing sustained partnerships with school districts, community partners, researchers, colleges and universities, policymakers, and other key stakeholders. To that end, social work courses that focus on community partnerships can focus on social work organizations such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) forming partnerships with local government and police agencies similar to Operation Cease Fire (Braga et al., 2008). These partnerships will have a goal of discussing ways to prevent unnecessary shootings and implementing new procedures that specifically address the problem. Clearly a renewed focus on educating students and practitioners on addressing this social problem is warranted.

The untimely death of young Black males by police shootings also has implications for social work practice and particularly for social workers who practice in the realm of social justice. Death by police shooting can lead to a distrust of law enforcement officers and the criminal justice system within the Black community; moreover, there is the issue of social justice and human rights violations. The NASW Code of Ethics clearly states that social workers challenge social injustice, and the Code of Ethics also states that social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems (NASW, 1996, 2008). There is a need for social workers to stand up for these victims, fight for changes in policies that govern police shootings, and scrutinize poor policing procedures as well.

Conclusion

The United States has positioned itself as a world superpower, and most of its citizens think that it is among the greatest countries in the world (Tyson, 2014). It is a place where freedom of speech is a right and people can speak their thoughts without fear of reprisal and imprisonment; it is a culturally diverse society made up of a plethora of ethnic and racial groups that lend to a richness of worldviews and ways of being; and it is a place where at the grassroots level people are socially active and participate in activities designed to challenge inequities and injustice. The United States is also a democracy where in theory all citizens have an equal right to full participation in the social order and its governance, but in practice this is not so.

At this time in history, America is being urgently challenged to rethink the policies that govern those, namely the police, who are responsible for ensuring the safety of all members of its populace. The authors have made recommendations that can be used by human service professionals, police, the Black church, and those who are concerned with the plight of young Black males to ensure the safety and survival of this group and to stop the killing of unarmed individuals by police. In the words of Liu Xiaobo (2014) "hatred is corrosive of a person's wisdom and conscience; the mentality of enmity can poison a nation's spirit, instigate brutal life and death struggles, destroy a society's tolerance and humanity, and block a nation's progress to freedom and democracy."

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