Notes from podcast number 207 by Sam Harris.

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[The End of Faith](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_End_of_Faith) (2004), won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction[[6]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris#cite_note-pen.org-6) and remained on [The New York Times Best Seller list](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_New_York_Times_Best_Seller_list) for 33 weeks.[[7]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sam_Harris#cite_note-7) Harris has subsequently published six other books: [Letter to a Christian Nation](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_to_a_Christian_Nation) in 2006, [The Moral Landscape: How Science Could Determine Human Values](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Moral_Landscape) in 2010, the long-form essay [Lying](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lying_%28Harris_book%29) in 2011, the short book [Free Will](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Free_Will_%28book%29) in 2012, [Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waking_Up%3A_A_Guide_to_Spirituality_Without_Religion) in 2014, and, with British writer [Maajid Nawaz](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maajid_Nawaz%22%20%5Co%20%22Maajid%20Nawaz), [Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam_and_the_Future_of_Tolerance) in 2015. Harris's work has been translated into over 20 languages

*Six, June 18, 2020*

In this episode of the podcast, Sam discusses the recent social protests and civil unrest, in light of what we know about racism and police violence in America.

This is a transcript of a [recorded podcast](https://samharris.org/podcasts/207-can-pull-back-brink/).

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Welcome to the Making Sense podcast… This is Sam Harris.

OK…. Well, I’ve been trying to gather my thoughts for this podcast for more than a week—and have been unsure about whether to record it at all, frankly.

Conversation is the only tool we have for making progress, I firmly believe that. But many of the things we most need to talk about, seem impossible to talk about.

I think social media is a huge part of the problem. I’ve been saying for a few years now that, with social media, we’ve all been enrolled in a psychological experiment for which no one gave consent, and it’s not at all clear how it will turn out. And it’s still not clear how it will turn out, but it’s not looking good. It’s fairly disorienting out there. All information is becoming weaponized. All communication is becoming performative. And on the most important topics, it now seems to be fury and sanctimony and bad faith almost all the time.

We appear to be driving ourselves crazy. Actually, crazy. As in, incapable of coming into contact with reality, unable to distinguish fact from fiction—and then becoming totally destabilized by our own powers of imagination, and confirmation bias, and then lashing out at one other on that basis.

So I’d like to talk about the current moment and the current social unrest, and its possible political implications, and other cultural developments, and suggest what it might take to pull back from the brink here. I’m going to circle in on the topics of police violence and the problem of racism, because that really is at the center of this. There is so much to talk about here, and it’s so difficult to talk about. And there is so much we don’t know. And yet, most people are behaving as though every important question was answered a long time ago.

I’ve been watching our country seem to tear itself apart for weeks now, and perhaps lay the ground for much worse to come. And I’ve been resisting the temptation to say anything of substance—not because I don’t have anything to say, but because of my perception of the danger, frankly. And if that’s the way I feel, given the pains that I’ve taken to insulate myself from those concerns, I know that almost everyone with a public platform is terrified. Journalists, and editors, and executives, and celebrities are terrified that they might take one wrong step here, and never recover.

And this is really unhealthy—not just for individuals, but for society. Because, again, all we have between us and the total breakdown of civilization is a series of successful conversations. If we can’t reason with one another, there is no path forward, other than violence. Conversation or violence.

So, I’d like to talk about some of the things that concern me about the current state of our communication. Unfortunately, many things are compounding our problems at the moment. We have a global pandemic which is still very much with us. And it remains to be seen how much our half-hearted lockdown, and our ineptitude in testing, and our uncoordinated reopening, and now our plunge into social protest and civil unrest will cause the Covid-19 caseload to spike. We will definitely see. As many have pointed out, the virus doesn’t care about economics or politics. It only cares that we keep breathing down each other’s necks. And we’ve certainly been doing enough of that.

Of course, almost no one can think about Covid-19 right now. But I’d just like to point out that many of the costs of this pandemic and the knock-on effects in the economy, and now this protest movement, many of these costs are hidden from us. In addition to killing more than 100,000 people in the US, the pandemic has been a massive opportunity cost. The ongoing implosion of the economy is imposing tangible costs, yes, but it is also a massive opportunity cost. And now this civil unrest is compounding those problems—whatever the merits of these protests may be or will be, the opportunity costs of this moment are staggering. In addition to all the tangible effects of what’s happening—the injury and death, the lost businesses, the burned buildings, the neighborhoods that won’t recover for years in many cities, the educations put on hold, and the breakdown in public trust of almost every institution—just think about all the good and important things we cannot do—cannot even *think* of doing now—and perhaps won’t contemplate doing for many years to come, because we’ll be struggling to get back to that distant paradise we once called “normal life.”

Of course, normal life for many millions of Americans was nothing like a paradise. The disparities in wealth and health and opportunity that we have gotten used to in this country, and that so much of our politics and ways of doing business seem to take for granted, are just unconscionable. There is no excuse for this kind of inequality in the richest country on earth. What we’re seeing now is a response to that. But it’s a confused and confusing response. Worse, it’s a response that is systematically silencing honest conversation. And this makes it dangerous.

This isn’t just politics and human suffering on display. It’s philosophy. It’s ideas about truth—about what it means to say that something is “true.” What we’re witnessing in our streets and online and in the impossible conversations we’re attempting to have in our private lives is a breakdown in epistemology. How does anyone figure out what’s going on in the world? What is real? If we can’t agree about what is real, or likely to be real, we will never agree about how we should live together. And the problem is, we’re stuck with one other.

So, what’s happening here?

Well, again, it’s hard to say. What is happening when [a police officer or a mayor takes a knee](https://youtu.be/viika57hTO4) in front of a crowd of young people who have been berating him for being a cog in the machinery of systemic racism? Is this a profound moment of human bonding that transcends politics, or is it the precursor to the breakdown of society? Or is it both? It’s not entirely clear.

In the most concrete terms, we are experiencing widespread social unrest in response to what is widely believed to be an epidemic of lethal police violence directed at the black community by racist cops and racist policies. And this unrest has drawn a counter-response from law enforcement—much of which, ironically, is guaranteed to exacerbate the problem of police violence, both real and perceived. And many of the videos we’ve seen of the police cracking down on peaceful protesters are hideous. Some of this footage has been unbelievable. And this is one of many vicious circles that we must find some way to interrupt.

Again, there is so much to be confused about here. We’ve now seen endless video of police inflicting senseless violence on truly peaceful protesters, and yet we have also seen video of the police [standing idly by](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1xrVp8vlQyU) while looters completely destroy businesses. What explains this? Is there a policy that led to this bizarre inversion of priorities? Are the police angry at the protesters for vilifying them, and simultaneously trying to teach society a lesson by letting crime and mayhem spread elsewhere in the city? Or is it just less risky to collide with peaceful protesters? Or is the whole spectacle itself a lie? How representative are these videos of what’s actually going on? Is there much less chaos actually occurring than is being advertised to us?

Again, it’s very hard to know.

What’s easy to know is that civil discourse has broken down. It seems to me that we’ve long been in a situation where the craziest voices on both ends of the political spectrum have been amplifying one another and threatening to produce something truly dangerous. And now I think they have. The amount of misinformation in the air—the degree to which even serious people seem to be ruled by false assumptions and non sequiturs—is just astonishing.

And it’s important to keep in mind that, with the presidential election coming in November, the stakes are really high. As most of you know, I consider four more years of Trump to be an existential threat to our democracy. And I believe that the last two weeks have been very good for him, politically, even when everything else seemed to go very badly for him. I know the polls don’t say this. A large majority of people disapprove of his handling this crisis so far. But I think we all know now to take polls with a grain of salt. There is the very real problem of preference falsification—especially in an environment of intense social pressure. People will often say what they think is socially acceptable, and then think, or say, or do something very different in private—like when they’re alone in a voting booth.

Trump has presided over the complete dismantling of American influence in the world and the destruction of our economy. I know the stock market has looked good, but the stock market has become totally uncoupled from the economy. According to the stock market, the future is just as bright now as it was in January of this year, before most of us had even heard of a novel coronavirus. That doesn’t make a lot of sense. And a lot can happen in the next few months. The last two weeks feel like a decade. And my concern is that if Trump now gets to be the law-and-order President, that may be his path to re-election, if such a path exists. Of course, this crisis has revealed, yet again, how unfit he is to be President. The man couldn’t strike a credible note of reconciliation if the fate of the country depended on it—and the fate of the country has depended on it. I also think it’s possible that these protests wouldn’t be happening, but for the fact that Trump is President. Whether or not the problem of racism has gotten worse in our society, having Trump as President surely makes it seem like it has. It has been such a repudiation of the Obama presidency that, for many people, it has made it seem that white supremacy is now ascendant. So, all the more reason to get rid of Trump in November.

But before this social unrest, our focus was on how incompetent Trump was in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. And now he has been given a very different battle to fight. A battle against leftwing orthodoxy, which is growing more stifling by the minute, and civil unrest. If our social order frays sufficiently, restoring it will be the only thing that most people care about in November. Just think of what an act of domestic terrorism would do politically now. Things can change very, very quickly. And to call a concern for basic law and order “racist”, isn’t going to wash.

Trust in institutions has totally broken down. We’ve been under a very precarious quarantine for more than 3 months, which almost the entire medical profession has insisted is necessary. Doctors and public health officials have castigated people on the political Right for protesting this lockdown. People have been unable to be with their loved ones in their last hours of life. They’ve been unable to hold funerals for them. But now we have doctors and public officials by the thousands, signing [open letters](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/05/health/health-care-open-letter-protests-coronavirus-trnd/index.html), making public statements, saying it’s fine to stand shoulder to shoulder with others in the largest protests our nation has ever seen. The degree to which this has undermined confidence in public health messaging is hard to exaggerate. Whatever your politics, this has been just a mortifying piece of hypocrisy. Especially so, because the pandemic has been hitting the African American community hardest of all. How many people will die because of these protests? It’s a totally rational question to ask, but the question itself is taboo now.

So, it seems to me that almost everything appears upside down at the moment.

Before I get into details on police violence, first let me try to close the door to a few misunderstandings.

Let’s start with the proximate cause of all this: The killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis police. I’ll have more to say about this in a minute, but nothing I say should detract from the following observation: That [video](https://youtu.be/vksEJR9EPQ8) was absolutely sickening, and it revealed a degree of police negligence and incompetence and callousness that everyone was right to be horrified by. In particular, the actions of Derek Chauvin, the cop who kept his knee on Floyd’s neck for nearly 9 minutes, his actions were so reckless and so likely to cause harm that there’s no question he should be prosecuted. And he is being prosecuted. He’s been indicted for 2nd degree murder and manslaughter, and I suspect he will spend many, many years in prison. And, this is not to say “the system is working.” It certainly seems likely that without the cell phone video, and the public outrage, Chauvin might have gotten away with it—to say nothing of the other cops with him, who are also now being prosecuted. If this is true, we clearly need a better mechanism with which to police the police.

So, as I said, I’ll return to this topic, because I think most people are drawing the wrong conclusions from this video, and from videos like it, but let me just echo everyone’s outrage over what happened. This is precisely the kind of police behavior that everyone should find abhorrent.

On the general topic of racism in America, I want to make a few similarly clear, preemptive statements:

Racism is still a problem in American society. No question. And slavery—which was racism’s most evil expression—was this country’s founding sin. We should also add the near-total eradication of the Native Americans to that ledger of evil. Any morally sane person who learns the details of these historical injustices finds them shocking, whatever their race. And the legacy of these crimes—crimes that were perpetrated for centuries—remains a cause for serious moral concern today. I have no doubt about this. And nothing I’m about to say, should suggest otherwise.

And I don’t think it’s an accident that the two groups I just mentioned, African Americans and Native Americans, suffer the worst from inequality in America today. How could the history of racial discrimination in this country not have had lasting effects, given the nature of that history? And if anything good comes out of the current crisis, it will be that we manage to find a new commitment to reducing inequality in all its dimensions. The real debate to have is about how to do this, economically and politically. But the status quo that many of us take for granted to is a betrayal of our values, whether we realize it or not. If it’s not a betrayal or your values now, it will be a betrayal of your values when you become a better person. And if you don’t manage that, it will be a betrayal of your kid’s values when they’re old enough to understand the world they are living in. The difference between being very lucky in our society, and very unlucky, should not be as enormous as it is.

However, the question that interests me, given what has been true of the past and is now true of the present, is what should we do next? What should we do to build a healthier society?

What should we do next?  Tomorrow… next week…. Obviously, I don’t have the answers. But I am very worried that many of the things we’re doing now, and seem poised to do, will only make our problems worse. And I’m especially worried that it has become so difficult to talk about this. I’m just trying to have conversations. I’m just trying to figure these things out in real time, with other people. And there is no question that conversation itself has become dangerous.

Think about the politics of this. Endless imagery of people burning and looting independent businesses that were struggling to survive, and seeing the owners of these businesses beaten by mobs, cannot be good for the cause of social justice. Looting and burning businesses, and assaulting their owners, isn’t social justice, or even social protest. It’s crime. And having imagery of these crimes that highlight black involvement circulate endlessly on Fox News and on social media cannot be good for the black community. But it might yet be good for Trump.

And it could well kick open the door to a level of authoritarianism that many of us who have been very worried about Trump barely considered possible. It’s always seemed somewhat paranoid to me to wonder whether we’re living in Weimar Germany. I’ve had many conversations about this. I had [Timothy Snyder on the podcast](https://samharris.org/podcasts/the-road-to-tyranny/), who’s been worrying about the prospect of tyranny in the US for several years now. I’ve known, in the abstract, that democracies can destroy themselves. But the idea that it could happen here still seemed totally outlandish to me. It doesn’t anymore.

Of course, what we’ve been seeing in the streets isn’t just one thing. Some people are protesting for reasons that I fully defend. They’re outraged by specific instances of police violence, like the killing of George Floyd, and they’re worried about creeping authoritarianism—which we really should be worried about now. And they’re convinced that our politics is broken, because it is broken, and they are deeply concerned that our response to the pandemic and the implosion of our economy will do nothing to address the widening inequality in our society. And they recognize that we have a President who is an incompetent, divisive, conman and a crackpot at a time when we actually need wise leadership.

All of that is hard to put on a sign, but it’s all worth protesting.

However, it seems to me that most protesters are seeing this moment exclusively through the lens of identity politics—and racial politics in particular. And some of them are even celebrating the breakdown of law and order, or at least remaining nonjudgmental about it. And you could see, in the early days of this protest, news anchors take that line, on CNN, for instance. Talking about the history of social protest, “Sometimes it has to be violent, right? What, do you think all of these protests need to be nonviolent?” Those words came out of Chris Cuomo’s mouth, and Don Lemon’s mouth. Many people have been circulating a half quote from Martin Luther King Jr. about riots being “the language of the unheard.” They’re [leaving out the part](https://youtu.be/pjYZZC5i_AU) where he made it clear that he believed riots harmed the cause of the black community and helped the cause of racists.

There are now calls to defund and even to abolish the police. This may be psychologically understandable when you’ve spent half your day on Twitter watching videos of cops beating peaceful protesters. Those videos are infuriating. And I’ll have a lot more to say about police violence in a minute. But if you think a society without cops is a society you would want to live in, you have lost your mind. Giving a monopoly on violence to the state is just about the best thing we have ever done as a species. It ranks right up there with keeping our shit out of our food. Having a police force that can deter crime, and solve crimes when they occur, and deliver violent criminals to a functioning justice system, is the necessary precondition for almost anything else of value in society.

We need police reform, of course. There are serious questions to ask about the culture of policing—its hiring practices, training, the militarization of so many police forces, outside oversight, how police departments deal with corruption, the way the police unions keep bad cops on the job, and yes, the problem of racist cops. But the idea that any serious person thinks we can do without the police—or that less trained and less vetted cops will magically be better than more trained and more vetted ones—this just reveals that our conversation on these topics has run completely off the rails. Yes, we should give more resources to community services. We should have psychologists or social workers make first contact with the homeless or the mentally ill. Perhaps we’re giving cops jobs they shouldn’t be doing. All of that makes sense to rethink. But the idea that what we’re witnessing now is a matter of the cops being over-resourced—that we’ve given them too much training, that we’ve made the job too attractive—so that the people we’re recruiting are of too high a quality. That doesn’t make any sense.

What’s been alarming here is that we’re seeing prominent people—in government, in media, in Hollywood, in sports—speak and act as though the breakdown of civil society, and of society itself, is a form of progress and any desire for law enforcement is itself a form of racist oppression. At one point the woman who’s running the City Council in Minneapolis, which just decided to abolish the police force, was asked by a journalist, I believe on CNN, “What do I do if someone’s breaking into my house in the middle of the night? Who do I call?” And her first response to that question was, “You need to recognize what a statement of privilege that question is.” She’s since had to walk that back, because it’s one of the most galling and embarrassing things a public official has ever said, but this is how close the Democratic Party is to sounding completely insane. You cannot say that if someone is breaking into your house, and you’re terrified, and you want a police force that can respond, that fear is a symptom of “white privilege.” This is where Democratic politics goes to die.

Again, what is alarming about this is that this woke analysis of the breakdown of law and order will only encourage an increasingly authoritarian response, as well as the acceptance of that response by many millions of Americans.

If you step back, you will notice that there is a kind of ecstasy of ideological conformity in the air. And it’s destroying institutions. It’s destroying the very institutions we rely on to get our information—universities, the press. The New York Times in recent days, seems to be preparing for a self-immolation in recent days. No one wants to say or even think anything that makes anyone uncomfortable—certainly not anyone who has more wokeness points than they do. It’s just become too dangerous. There are people [being fired](https://wwos.nine.com.au/news/nba-announcer-fired-over-controversial-all-lives-matter-tweet/a9a50198-4b52-4cb7-a800-e0ffacb3302d) for tweeting “All Lives Matter.” #AllLivesMatter, in the current environment, is being read as a naked declaration of white supremacy. That is how weird this moment is. A soccer player on the LA Galaxy [was fired](https://www.tampabay.com/sports/rowdies/2020/06/05/la-galaxy-releases-player-after-wifes-racist-and-violent-social-media-posts/) for something his wife tweeted…

Of course, there are real problems of inequality and despair at the bottom of these protests. People who have never found a secure or satisfying place in the world—or young people who fear they never will—people who have seen their economic prospects simply vanish, and people who have had painful encounters with racism and racist cops—people by the millions are now surrendering themselves to a kind of religious awakening. But like most religious awakenings, this movement is not showing itself eager to make honest contact with reality.

On top of that, we find extraordinarily privileged people, whatever the color of their skin—people who have been living wonderful lives in their gated communities or 5th avenue apartments—and who feel damn guilty about it—they are supporting this movement uncritically, for many reasons. Of course, they care about other people—I’m sure most of them have the same concerns about inequality that I do—but they are also supporting this movement because it promises a perfect expiation of their sins. If you have millions of dollars, and shoot botox into your face, and vacation on St. Bart’s, and you’re liberal—the easiest way to sleep at night is to be as woke as AOC and like every one of her tweets.

The problem isn’t just with the looting, and the arson, and the violence. There are problems with these peaceful protests themselves.

Of course, I’m not questioning anyone’s right to protest. Even our deranged president can pay lip service to that right—which he did as the DC police were violently dispersing a peaceful protest so that he could get his picture taken in front of that church, awkwardly holding a bible, as though he had never held a book in life.

The problem with the protests is that they are animated, to a remarkable degree, by confusion and misinformation. And I’ll explain why I think that’s the case. And, of course, this will be controversial. Needless to say, many people will consider the color of my skin to be disqualifying here. I could have invited any number of great, black intellectuals onto the podcast to make these points for me. But that struck me as a form of cowardice. Glenn Loury, John McWhorter, Thomas Chatterton Williams, Coleman Hughes, Kmele Foster, these guys might not agree with everything I’m about to say, but any one of them could walk the tightrope I’m now stepping out on far more credibly than I can.

But, you see, that’s part of the problem. The perception that the color of a person’s skin, or even his life experience, matters for this discussion is a pernicious illusion. For the discussion we really need to have, the color of a person’s skin, and even his life experience, simply does not matter. It cannot matter. We have to break this spell that the politics of identity has cast over everything.

Ok…

As I’ve already acknowledged, there is a legacy of racism in the United States that we’re still struggling to outgrow. That is obvious. There are real racists out there. And there are ways in which racism became institutionalized long ago. Many of you will remember that during the crack epidemic the penalties for crack and powder cocaine were quite different. And this led black drug offenders to be locked up for much longer than white ones. Now, whether the motivation for that policy was consciously racist or not, I don’t know, but it was effectively racist. Nothing I’m about to say entails a denial of these sorts of facts. There just seems to be no question that boys who grow up with their fathers in prison start life with a significant strike against them. So criminal justice reform is absolutely essential.

And I’m not denying that many black people, perhaps most, have interactions with cops, and others in positions of power, or even random strangers, that seem unambiguously racist. Sometimes this is because they are actually in the presence of racism, and perhaps sometimes it only seems that way. I’ve had unpleasant encounters with cops, and customs officers, and TSA screeners, and bureaucrats of every kind, and even with people working in stores or restaurants. People aren’t always nice or ethical. But being white, and living in a majority white society, I’ve never had to worry about whether any of these collisions were the result of racism. And I can well imagine that in some of these situations, had I been black, I would have come away feeling that I had encountered yet another racist in the wild. So I consider myself very lucky to have gone through life not having to think about any of that. Surely that’s one form of white privilege.

So, nothing I’m going to say denies that we should condemn racism—whether interpersonal or institutional—and we should condemn it wherever we find it. But as a society, we simply can’t afford to find and condemn racism where it doesn’t exist. And we should be increasingly aware of the costs of doing that. The more progress we make on issues of race, the less racism there will be to find, and the more likely we’ll find ourselves chasing after its ghost.

The truth is, we have made considerable progress on the problem of racism in America. This isn’t 1920, and it isn’t 1960. We had a two-term black president. We have black congressmen and women. We have black mayors and black chiefs of police. There are major cities, like Detroit and Atlanta, going on their fifth or sixth consecutive black mayor. Having more and more black people in positions of real power, in what is still a majority white society, is progress on the problem of racism. And the truth is, it might not even solve the problem we’re talking about. When Freddy Gray was killed in Baltimore, virtually everyone who could have been held accountable for his death was black. The problem of police misconduct and reform is complicated, as we’re about to see. But obviously, there is more work to do on the problem of racism. And, more important, there is much more work to do to remedy the inequalities in our society that are so correlated with race, and will still be correlated with race, even after the last racist has been driven from our shores.

The question of how much of today’s inequality is due to existing racism—whether racist people or racist policies—is a genuinely difficult question to answer. And to answer it, we need to distinguish the past from the present.

Take wealth inequality, for example: The median white family has a net worth of around $170,000—these data are a couple of years old, but they’re probably pretty close to what’s true now. The median black family has a net worth of around $17,000. So we have a [tenfold difference in median wealth](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brookings-now/2019/06/18/a-conversation-about-the-racial-wealth-gap-and-how-to-address-it/). (That’s the median, not the mean: Half of white families are below 170,000 and half above; half of black families are below 17,000 and half above. And we’re talking about wealth here, not income.)

This disparity in wealth persists even for people whose incomes are in the top 10 percent of the income distribution. For whites in the top 10 percent for income, the median net worth is $1.8 million; for blacks it’s around $350,000. There are probably many things that account for this disparity in wealth. It seems that black families that make it to the top of the income distribution fall out of it more easily than white families do. But it’s also undeniable that black families have less intergenerational wealth accumulated through inheritance.

How much of this is inequality due to the legacy of slavery? And how much of it is due to an ensuing century of racist policies? I’m prepared to believe quite a lot. And it strikes me as totally legitimate to think about paying reparations as a possible remedy here. Of course, one will then need to talk about reparations for the Native Americans. And then one wonders where this all ends. And what about blacks who aren’t descended from slaves, but who still suffered the consequences of racism in the US? In listening to people like [John McWhorter](https://youtu.be/FXt9Q5h1sCY) and Coleman Hughes discuss this topic, I’m inclined to think that reparations is probably unworkable as a policy. But the truth is that I’m genuinely unsure about this.

Whatever we decide about the specific burdens of the past, we have to ask, how much of current wealth inequality is due to existing racism and to existing policies that make it harder for black families to build wealth? And the only way to get answers to those questions is to have a dispassionate discussion about facts.

The problem with the social activism we are now seeing—what John McWhorter has called “the new religion of anti-Racism”—is that it finds racism nearly everywhere, even where it manifestly does not exist. And this is incredibly damaging to the cause of achieving real equality in our society. It’s almost impossible to exaggerate the evil and injustice of slavery and its aftermath. But it is possible to exaggerate how much racism currently exists at an Ivy League university, or in Silicon Valley, or at the Oscars. And those exaggerations are toxic—and, perversely, they may produce more real racism. It seems to me that false claims of victimhood can diminish the social stature of any group, even a group that has a long history of real victimization.

The imprecision here—the bad-faith arguments, the double standards, the goal-post shifting, the [idiotic opinion pieces](https://nyti.ms/2hrFzz1) in the New York Times, the defenestrations on social media, the general hysteria that the cult of wokeness has produced—I think this is all extremely harmful to civil society, and to effective liberal politics, and to the welfare of African Americans.

So, with that as preamble, let’s return to the tragic death of George Floyd.

As I said, I believe that any sane person who watches that video will feel that they have witnessed a totally unjustified killing. So, people of any race, are right to be horrified by what happened there. But now I want to ask a few questions, and I want us to try to consider them dispassionately. And I really want you to watch your mind while you do this. There are very likely to be few tripwires installed there, and I’m about to hit them. So just do your best to remain calm.

Does the killing of George Floyd prove that we have a problem of racism in the United States?

Does it even suggest that we have a problem of racism in the United States?

In other words, do we have reason to believe that, had Floyd been white, he wouldn’t have died in a similar way?

Do the dozen or so other videos that have emerged in recent years, of black men being killed by cops, do they prove, or even suggest, that there is an epidemic of lethal police violence directed especially at black men and that this violence is motivated by racism?

Most people seem to think that the answers to these questions are so obvious that to even pose them as I just did is obscene. The answer is YES, and it’s a yes that now needs to be shouted in the streets.

The problem, however, is that if you take even 5 minutes to look at the data on crime and police violence, the answer appears to be “no,” in every case, albeit with one important caveat. I’m not talking about how the police behaved in 1970 or even 1990. But in the last 25 years, violent crime has come down significantly in the US, and so has the police use of deadly force. And as you’re about to see, the police used more deadly force against white people—both in absolute numbers, and in terms of their contribution to crime and violence in our society. But the public perception is, of course, completely different.

In a city like Los Angeles, [2019 was a 30-year low](https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2020-05-12/lapd-use-of-force-report) for police shootings. Think about that…. Do the people who were protesting in Los Angeles, peacefully and violently, do the people who were ransacking and burning businesses by the hundreds—in many cases, businesses that will not return to their neighborhoods—do the people who caused so much damage to the city, that certain neighborhoods, ironically the neighborhoods that are disproportionately black, will take years, probably decades to recover, do the celebrities who supported them, and even bailed them out of jail—do any of these people know that 2019 was the 30-year low for police shootings in Los Angeles?

Before I step out further over the abyss here, let me reiterate: Many of you are going to feel a visceral negative reaction to what I’m about to say. You’re not going to like the way it sounds. You’re especially not going to like the way it sounds coming from a white guy. This feeling of not liking, this feeling of outrage, this feeling of disgust—this feeling of “Sam, what the fuck is wrong with you, why are you even touching this topic?”—this feeling isn’t an argument. It isn’t, or shouldn’t be, the basis for your believing anything to be true or false about the world.

Your capacity to be offended isn’t something that I or anyone else needs to respect. Your capacity to be offended isn’t something that you should respect. In fact, it is something that you should be on your guard for. Perhaps more than any other property of your mind, this feeling can mislead you.

If you care about justice—and you absolutely should—you should care about facts and the ability to discuss them openly. Justice requires contact with reality. It simply isn’t the case—it cannot be the case—that the most pressing claims on our sense of justice need come from those who claim to be the most offended by conversation itself.

So, I’m going to speak the language of facts right now, in so far as we know them, all the while knowing that these facts run very much counter to most people’s assumptions. Many of the things you think you know about crime and violence in our society are almost certainly wrong. And that should matter to you.

So just take a moment and think this through with me.

How many people are killed each year in America by cops? If you don’t know, guess. See if you have any intuitions for these numbers. Because your intuitions are determining how you interpret horrific videos of the sort we saw coming out of Minneapolis.

The answer for many years running is [about 1000](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/). One thousand people are killed by cops in America each year. There are about 50 to 60 million encounters between civilians and cops each year, and [about 10 million arrests](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2017/crime-in-the-u.s.-2017/tables/table-29). That’s down from a high of over 14 million arrests annually throughout the 1990’s. So, of the 10 million occasions where a person attracts the attention of the police, and the police decide to make an arrest, about 1000 of those people die as a result. (I’m sure a few people get killed even when no arrest was attempted, but that has to be a truly tiny number.) So, without knowing anything else about the situation, if the cops decide to arrest you, it would be reasonable to think that your chance of dying is around 1/10,000. Of course, in the United States, it’s higher than it is in other countries. So I’m not saying that this number is acceptable. But it is what it is for a reason, as we’re about to see.

Now, there are a few generic things I’d like to point here before we get further into the data. They should be uncontroversial.

First, it’s almost certainly the case that of these 1000 officer-caused deaths each year, some are entirely justified—it may even be true that most are entirely justified—and some are entirely unjustified, and some are much harder to judge. And that will be true next year. And the year after that.

Of the unjustified killings, there are vast differences between them. Many have nothing in common but for the fact that a cop killed someone unnecessarily. It might have been a terrible misunderstanding, or incompetence, or just bad luck, and in certain cases it could be a cop who decides to murder someone because he’s become enraged, or he’s just a psychopath. And it is certainly possible that racial bias accounts for some number of these unjustified killings.

Another point that should be uncontroversial—but may sound a little tone-deaf in the current environment, where we’ve inundated with videos of police violence in response to these protests. But this has to be acknowledged whenever we’re discussing this topic: Cops have a very hard job. In fact, in the current environment, they have an almost impossible job.

If you’re making 10 million arrests every year, some number of people will decide not to cooperate. There can be many reasons for this. A person could be mentally ill, or drunk, or on drugs. Of course, rather often the person is an actual criminal who doesn’t want to be arrested.

Among innocent people, and perhaps this getting more common these days, a person might feel that resisting arrest is the right thing to do, ethically or politically or as a matter of affirming his identity. After all, put yourself in his shoes, he did nothing wrong. Why are the cops arresting him? I don’t know if we have data on the numbers of people who resist arrest by race. But I can well imagine that if it’s common for African Americans to believe that the only reason they have been singled out for arrest is due to racism on the part of the police, that could lead to greater levels of non-compliance. Which seems very likely to lead to more unnecessary injury and death. This is certainly one reason why it is wise to have the racial composition of a police force mirror that of the community it’s policing. Unfortunately, there’s no evidence that this will reduce lethal violence from the side of the police. In fact, the evidence we have suggests that black and Hispanic cops are [more likely](https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/116/32/15877.full.pdf) to shoot black and Hispanic suspects than white cops are. But it would surely change the perception of the community that racism is a likely explanation for police behavior, which itself might reduce conflict.

When a cop goes hands on a person in an attempt to control his movements or make an arrest, that person’s resistance poses a problem that most people don’t understand. If you haven’t studied this topic. If you don’t know what it physically takes to restrain and immobilize a non-compliant person who may be bigger and stronger than you are, and if you haven’t thought through the implications of having a gun on your belt while attempting to do that—a gun that can be grabbed and used against you, or against a member of the public—then your intuitions about what makes sense here, tactically and ethically, are very likely to be bad.

If you haven’t trained with firearms under stress. If you don’t know how suddenly situations can change. If you haven’t experienced how quickly another person can close the distance on you, and how little time you have to decide to draw your weapon. If you don’t know how hard it is to shoot a moving target, or even a stationary one, when your heart is beating out of your chest. You very likely have totally unreasonable ideas about what we can expect from cops in situations like these. [[VIDEO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9NwWado4SVY&bpctr=1592453276), [VIDEO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygbOLb0O7Pw&bpctr=1592455027), [VIDEO](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_87GBOCVYTM)]

And there is another fact that looms over all this like the angel of Death, literally: Most cops do not get the training they need. They don’t get the [hand-to-hand training](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YQLOmfx8X_E&feature=emb_title) they need—they don’t have good skills to subdue people without harming them. All you need to do is watch YouTube videos of botched arrests to see this. The martial arts community stands in perpetual astonishment at [the kinds of things cops do and fail to do](https://youtu.be/F4VeHOkt_o8) once they start fighting with suspects. Cops also don’t get the firearms training they need. Of course, there are elite units in many police departments, but most cops do not have the training they need to do the job they’re being asked to do.

It is also true, no doubt, that some cops are racist bullies. And there are corrupt police departments that cover for these guys, and cover up police misconduct generally, whether it was borne of racism or not.

But the truth is that even if we got rid of all bad cops, which we absolutely should do, and there were only good people left, and we got all these good people the best possible training, and we gave them the best culture in which to think about their role in society, and we gave them the best methods for de-escalating potentially violent situations—which we absolutely must do—and we scrubbed all the dumb laws from our books, so that when cops were required to enforce the law, they were only risking their lives and the lives of civilians for reasons that we deem necessary and just—so the war on drugs is obviously over—even under these conditions of perfect progress, we are still guaranteed to have some number of cases each year where a cop kills a civilian in a way that is totally unjustified, and therefore tragic. Every year, there will be some number of families who will be able to say that the cops killed their son or daughter, or father or mother, or brother or sister. And videos of these killings will occasionally surface, and they will be horrific. This seems guaranteed to happen.

So, while we need to make all these improvements, we still need to understand that there are very likely always to going to be videos of cops doing something inexplicable, or inexplicably stupid, that results in an innocent person’s death, or a not-so-innocent person’s death. And sometimes the cop will be white and the victim will be black. We have 10 million arrests each year. And we now live in a panopticon where practically everything is videotaped.

I’m about to get further into the details of what we know about police violence, but I want to just put it to you now: If we’re going to let the health of race relations in this country, or the relationship between the community and the police, depend on whether we ever see a terrible video of police misconduct again, the project of healing these wounds in our society is doomed.

About a week into these protests I heard Van Jones on CNN say, “If we see one more video of a cop brutalizing a black man, this country could go over the edge.” He said this, not as indication of how dangerously inflamed people have become. He seemed to be saying it as an ultimatum to the police. With 10 million arrests a year, arrests that have to take place in the most highly armed society in the developed world, I hope you understand how unreasonable that ultimatum is.

We have to put these videos into context. And we have to acknowledge how different they are from one another. Some of them are easy to interpret. But some are quite obviously being interpreted incorrectly by most people—especially by activists. And there are a range of cases—some have video associated with them and some don’t—that are now part of a litany of anti-racist outrage, and the names of the dead are intoned as though they were all evidence of the same injustice. And yet, they are not.

[Walter Scott](https://youtu.be/XKQqgVlk0NQ) was stopped for a broken taillight and got out of his car and tried to flee. There might have been a brief struggle over the officer’s taser, that part of the video isn’t clear. But what is clear is that he was shot in the back multiple times as he was running away. That was insane. There was zero reason for the officer to feel that his life was under threat at the point he opened fire. And for that unjustified shooting, he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. I’m not sure that’s long enough. That seemed like straight-up murder.

The George Floyd video, while even more disturbing to watch, is harder to interpret. I don’t know anything about Derek Chauvin, the cop who knelt on his neck. It’s quite possible that he’s a terrible person who should have never been a cop. He seems to have a significant number of complaints against him—though, as far as I know, the details of those complaints haven’t been released. And he might be a racist on top of being a bad cop. Or he might be a guy who was totally in over his head and thought you could restrain someone indefinitely by keeping a knee on their neck indefinitely. I don’t know. I’m sure more facts will come out. But whoever he is, I find it very unlikely that he was intending to kill George Floyd. Think about it. He was surrounded by irate witnesses and being filmed. Unless he was aspiring to become the most notorious murderer in human history, it seems very unlikely that he was intending to commit murder in that moment. It’s possible, of course. But it doesn’t seem the likeliest explanation for his behavior.

What I believe we saw on that video was the result of a tragic level of negligence and poor training on the part of those cops. Or terrible recruitment—it’s possible that none of these guys should have ever been cops. I think for one of them, it was only his fourth day on the job. Just imagine that. Just imagine all things you don’t know as a new cop.  It could also be a function of bad luck in terms of Floyd’s underlying health. It’s been reported that he was complaining of being unable to breath before Chauvin pinned him with his knee. The knee on his neck might not have been the only thing that caused his death. It could have also been the weight of the other officer pinning him down.

This is almost certainly what happened in the cast of Eric Garner. Half the people on earth believe they witnessed a cop choke Eric Garner to death in that video. That does not appear to be what happened. When Eric Garner is saying “I can’t breathe” he’s not being choked. He’s being held down on the pavement by several officers. Being forced down on your stomach under the weight of several people can kill a person, especially someone with lung or heart disease. In the case of Eric Garner, it is absolutely clear that the cop who briefly attempted to choke him was no longer choking him. If you doubt that, watch the [video](https://youtu.be/Nql1xRtWKOU) again.

And if you are recoiling now from my interpretation of these videos, you really should watch [the killing of Tony Timpa](https://youtu.be/_c-E_i8Q5G0). It’s also terribly disturbing, but it removes the variable of race and it removes any implication of intent to harm on the part of the cops about as clearly as you could ask. It really is worth watching as a corrective to our natural interpretation of these other videos.

Tony Timpa was a white man in Dallas, who was suffering some mental health emergency and cocaine intoxication. And he actually called 911 himself. What we see is the bodycam footage from the police, which shows that he was already in handcuffs when they arrived—a security guard had cuffed him. And then the cops take over, and they restrain Timpa on the ground, by rolling him onto a stomach and putting their weight on him, very much like in the case of Eric Garner. And they keep their weight on him—one cop has a knee on his upper back, which is definitely much less aggressive than a knee on the neck—but they crush the life out of him all the same, over the course of 13 minutes. He’s not being choked. The cops are not being rough. There’s no animus between them and Timpa. It was not a hostile arrest. They clearly believe that they’re responding to a mental health emergency. But they keep him down on his belly, under their weight, and they’re cracking jokes as he loses consciousness. Now, your knowledge that he’s going to be dead by the end of this video, make their jokes seem pretty callous. But this was about as benign an imposition of force by cops as you’re going to see. The crucial insight you will have watching this video, is that the officers not only had no intent to kill Tony Timpa, they don’t take his pleading seriously because they have no doubt that what they’re doing is perfectly safe—perfectly within protocol. They’ve probably done this hundreds of times before.

If you watch that video—and, again, fair warning, it is disturbing—but imagine how disturbing it would have been to our society if Tony Timpa had been black. If the only thing you changed about the video was the color of Timpa’s skin, then that video would have detonated like a nuclear bomb in our society, exactly as the George Floyd video did. In fact, in one way it is worse, or would have been perceived to be worse. I mean, just imagine white cops telling jokes as they crushed the life out of a black Tony Timpa… Given the nature of our conversation about violence, given the way we perceive videos of this kind, there is no way that people would have seen that as anything other than a lynching. And yet, it would not have been a lynching.

Now, I obviously have no idea what was in the minds of cops in Minneapolis. And perhaps we’ll learn at trial. Perhaps a tape of Chauvin using the N-word in another context will surface, bringing in a credible allegation of racism. It seems to me that Chauvin is going to have a very hard time making sense of his actions. But most people who saw that video believe they have seen, with their own eyes, beyond any possibility of doubt, a racist cop intentionally murder an innocent man. That’s not what the video necessarily shows.

As I said, these videos can be hard to interpret, even while seeming very easy to interpret. And these cases, whether we have associated video or not, are very different. Michael Brown is reported to have punched a cop in the face and attempted to get his gun. As far as I know, there’s no video of that encounter. But, if true, that is an entirely different situation. If you’re attacking a cop, trying to get his gun, that is a life and death struggle that almost by definition for the cop, and it most cases justifies the use of lethal force. And honestly, it seems that no one within a thousand miles of Black Lives Matter is willing to make these distinctions. An attitude of anti-racist moral outrage is not the best lens through which to interpret evidence of police misconduct.

I’ve seen many videos of people getting arrested. And I’ve seen the outraged public reaction to what appears to be inappropriate use of force by the cops. One overwhelming fact that comes through is that people, whatever the color of their skin, don’t understand how to behave around cops so as to keep themselves safe. People have to stop resisting arrest. This may seem obvious, but judging from most of these videos, and from the public reaction to them, this must be a totally arcane piece of information. When a cop wants to take you into custody, you don’t get to decide whether or not you should be arrested. When a cop wants to take you into custody, for whatever reason, it’s not a negotiation. And if you turn it into a wrestling match, you’re very likely to get injured or killed.

This is a point I once belabored in a [podcast with Glenn Loury](https://samharris.org/podcasts/racism-and-violence-in-america/), and it became essentially a public service announcement. And I’ve gone back and listened to those comments, and I want to repeat them here. This is something that everyone really needs to understand. And it’s something that Black Lives Matter should be teaching explicitly: If you put your hands on a cop—if you start wrestling with a cop, or grabbing him because he’s arresting your friend, or pushing him, or striking him, or using your hands in way that can possibly be interpreted as your reaching for a gun—you are likely to get shot in the United States, whatever the color of your skin.

As I said, when you’re with a cop, there is always a gun out in the open. And any physical struggle has to be perceived by him as a fight for the gun. A cop doesn’t know what you’re going to do if you overpower him, so he has to assume the worst. Most cops are not confident in their ability to physically control a person without shooting him—for good reason, because they’re not well trained to do that, and they’re continually confronting people who are bigger, or younger, or more athletic, or more aggressive than they are. Cops are not superheroes. They’re ordinary people with insufficient training, and once things turn physical they cannot afford to give a person who is now assaulting a police officer the benefit of the doubt.

This is something that most people seem totally confused about. If they see a video of somebody trying to punch a cop in the face and the person’s unarmed, many people think the cop should just punch back, and any use of deadly force would be totally disproportionate. But that’s not how violence works. It’s not the cop’s job to be the best bare-knuckled boxer on Earth so he doesn’t have to use his gun. A cop can’t risk getting repeatedly hit in the face and knocked out, because there’s always a gun in play. This is the cop’s perception of the world, and it’s a justifiable one, given the dynamics of human violence.

You might think cops shouldn’t carry guns. Why can’t we just be like England? That’s a point that can be debated. But it requires considerable thought in a country where there are over 300 million guns on the street. The United States is not England.

Again, really focus on what is happening when a cop is attempting to arrest a person. It’s not up to you to decide whether or not you should be arrested. Does it matter that you know you didn’t do anything wrong? No. And how could that fact be effectively communicated in the moment by your not following police commands? I’m going to ask that again: How could the fact that you’re innocent, that you’re not a threat to cop, that you’re not about to suddenly attack him or produce a weapon of your own, how could those things be effectively communicated at the moment he’s attempting to arrest you by your resisting arrest?

Unless you called the cops yourself, you never know what situation you’re in. If I’m walking down the street, I don’t know if the cop who is approaching me didn’t get a call that some guy who looks like Ben Stiller just committed an armed robbery. I know I didn’t do anything, but I don’t know what’s in the cop’s head. The time to find out what’s going on—the time to complain about racist cops, the time to yell at them and tell them they’re all going to get fired for their stupidity and misconduct—is after cooperating, at the police station, in the presence of a lawyer, preferably. But to not comply in the heat of the moment, when a guy with the gun is issuing commands—this raises your risk astronomically, and it’s something that most people, it seems, just do not intuitively understand, even when they’re not in the heat of the moment themselves, but just watching video of other people getting arrested.

Ok. End of public-service announcement.

The main problem with using individual cases, where black men and women have been killed by cops, to conclude that there is an epidemic of racist police violence in our society, is that you can find nearly identical cases of white suspects being killed by cops, and there are actually more of them.

In 2016, John McWhorter wrote a [piece](https://time.com/4404987/police-violence/) in Time Magazine about this.

Here’s a snippet of what he wrote:

“The heart of the indignation over these murders is a conviction that racist bias plays a decisive part in these encounters. That has seemed plausible to me, and I have recently challenged those who disagree to present a list of white people killed within the past few years under circumstances similar to those that so enrage us in cases such as what happened to Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Walter Scott, Sam Debose, and others.”

So, McWhorter issued that challenge, as he said, and he was presented with the cases [[VIDEO](https://youtu.be/EPxNUKw0kV8), [VIDEO](https://youtu.be/VBUUx0jUKxc), [VIDEO](https://youtu.be/6KhRcIOuurI)]. But there’s no song about these people, admonishing us to say their names. And the list of white names is longer, and I don’t know any of them, other than Tony Timpa. I know the black names. In addition to the ones I just read from McWhorter’s article, I know the names of Eric Garner, and Michael Brown, and Alton Sterling, and Philando Castile, and now, of course, I know the name of George Floyd. And I’m aware of many of the details of these cases where black men and women have been killed by cops. I know the name of Breonna Taylor. I can’t name a single white person killed by cops in circumstances like these—other than Timpa—and I just read McWhorter’s article where he lists many of them.

So, this is also a distortion in the media. The media is not showing us videos of white people being killed by cops; activists are not demanding that they do this. I’m sure white supremacists talk about this stuff a lot, who knows? But in terms of the story we’re telling ourselves in the mainstream, we are not actually talking about the data on lethal police violence.

So back to the data: Again, cops kill around 1000 people every year in the United States. About 25 percent are black. About 50 percent are white. The data on police homicide are all over the place. The federal government does not have a single repository for data of this kind. But they have been pretty carefully tracked by outside sources, like the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/), for the last 5 years. These ratios appear stable over time. Again, many of these killings are justifiable, we’re talking about career criminals who are often armed and, in many cases, trying to kill the cops. Those aren’t the cases we’re worried about. We’re worried about the unjustifiable homicides.

Now, some people will think that these numbers still represent an outrageous injustice. Afterall, African Americans are only 13 percent of the population. So, at most, they should be 13 percent of the victims of police violence, not 25 percent. Any departure from the baseline population must be due to racism.

Ok. Well, that sounds plausible, but consider a few more facts:

Blacks are 13 percent of the population, but they commit [at least 50 percent](https://ucr.fbi.gov/crime-in-the-u.s/2015/crime-in-the-u.s.-2015/offenses-known-to-law-enforcement/expanded-homicide) of the murders and [other violent crimes](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-myth-of-systemic-police-racism-11591119883).

If you have 13 percent of the population responsible for 50 percent of the murders—and in some cities committing 2/3rds of all violent crime—what percent of police attention should it attract? I don’t know. But I’m pretty sure it’s not just 13 percent. Given that the overwhelming majority of their victims are black, I’m pretty sure that most black people wouldn’t set the dial at 13 percent either.

And here we arrive at the core of the problem. The story of crime in America is overwhelmingly the story of black-on-black crime. It is also, in part, a story of black-on-white crime. For more than a generation, crime in America really hasn’t been a story of much white-on-black crime. [Some listeners mistook my meaning here. I’m not denying that most violent crime is intraracial. So, it’s true that most white homicide victims are killed by white offenders. Per capita, however, the white crime rate is much lower than the black crime rate. And there is more black-on-white crime than white-on-black crime.—SH]

The murder rate has come down steadily since the early 1990’s, with only minor upticks. But, nationwide, blacks are still [6 times more likely](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_09-508.pdf) to get murdered than whites, and in some cities their risk is double that. And [around 95 percent](https://www.hks.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/centers/wiener/programs/pcj/files/PoliceandPublicDiscourseBlackonBlackViolence.pdf) of the murders are committed by members of the African American community. [While reported in 2015, these data were more than a decade old. Looking at more recent data from the [FBI’s Uniform Crime Report](https://www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/), the number appears to be closer to 90 percent.—SH]

The weekend these protests and riots were kicking off nationwide—when our entire country seemed to be tearing itself apart over a perceived epidemic of racist police violence against the black community, [92 people were shot, and 27 killed](https://abcnews.go.com/US/chicago-sees-18-homicides-deadliest-day-60-years/story?id=71150234), in Chicago alone—one city. This is almost entirely a story of black men killing members of their own community. And this is far more representative of the kind of violence that the black community needs to worry about. And, ironically, it’s clear that one remedy for this violence is, or would be, effective policing.

These are simply the facts of crime in our society as we best understand them. And the police have to figure out how to respond to these facts, professionally and ethically. The question is, are they doing that? And, obviously, there’s considerable doubt that they’re doing that, professionally and ethically.

Roland Fryer, the Harvard economist who’s work I discussed on the podcast with Glenn Loury, studied police encounters involving black and white suspects and the use of force.

His [paper](https://www.nber.org/papers/w22399) is titled, this from 2016, “An Empirical Analysis of Racial Differences in Police Use of Force.”

Fryer is black, and he went into this research with the expectation that the data would confirm that there’s an epidemic of lethal police violence directed at black men. But he didn’t find that. However, he did find support for the suspicion that black people suffer more nonlethal violence at the hands of cops than whites do.

So let’s look at this.

The study examined data from 10 major police departments, in Texas, Florida and California. Generally, Fryer found that there is 25 percent greater likelihood that the police would go hands on black suspects than white ones—cuffing them, or forcing them to ground, or using other non-lethal force.

Specifically, in New York City, in encounters where white and black citizens were matched for other characteristics, they found that:

Cops were…

* 17 percent more likely to go hands on black suspects
* 18 percent more likely to push them into a wall
* 16 percent more likely to put them in handcuffs (in a situation in which they aren’t arrested)
* 18 percent more likely to push them to the ground
* 25 percent more likely to use pepper spray or a baton
* 19 percent more likely to draw their guns
* 24 percent more likely to point a gun at them.

This is more or less the full continuum of violence short of using lethal force. And it seems, from the data we have, that blacks receive more of it than whites. What accounts for this disparity? Racism? Maybe. However, as I said, it’s inconvenient to note that other data suggest that black cops and Hispanic cops are more likely to shoot black and Hispanic suspects than white cops are. I’m not sure how an ambient level of racism explains that.

Are there other explanations? Well, again, could it be that blacks are less cooperative with the police. If so, that’s worth understanding. A culture of resisting arrest would be a very bad thing to cultivate, given that the only response to such resistance is for the police to increase their use of force.

Whatever is true here is something we should want to understand. And it’s all too easy to see how an increased number of encounters with cops, due to their policing in the highest crime neighborhoods, which are disproportionately black, and an increased number of traffic stops in those neighborhoods, and an increased propensity for cops to go hands-on these suspects, with or without an arrest, for whatever reason—it’s easy to see how all of this could be the basis for a perception of racism, whether or not racism is the underlying motivation.

It is totally humiliating to be arrested or manhandled by a cop. And, given the level of crime in the black community, a disproportionate number of innocent black men seem guaranteed to have this experience. It’s totally understandable that this would make them bitter and mistrustful of the police. This is another vicious circle that we must find some way to interrupt.

But Fryer also found that black suspects are around 25 percent less likely to be shot than white suspects are. And in the most egregious situations, where officers were not first attacked, but nevertheless fired their weapons at a suspect, they were more likely to do this when the suspect was white.

Again, the data are incomplete. This doesn’t not cover every city in the country. And a larger study tomorrow might paint a different picture. But, as far as I know, the best data we have suggest that for, whatever reason, whites are more likely to be killed by cops once an arrest is attempted. And a [more recent study](https://www.pnas.org/content/116/32/15877.short) in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences  by David Johnson and colleagues found similar results. And it is simply undeniable that more whites are killed by cops each year, both in absolute numbers and in proportion to their contributions to crime and violence in our society.

Can you hear how these facts should be grinding in that well-oiled machine of woke outrage? Our society is in serious trouble now. We are being crushed under the weight of a global pandemic and our response to it has been totally inept. On top of that, we’re being squeezed by the growing pressure of what might become a full-on economic depression. And the streets are now filled with people who imagine, on the basis of seeing some horrific videos, that there is an epidemic of racist cops murdering African Americans. Look at what this belief is doing to our politics. And these videos will keep coming. And the truth is they could probably be matched 2 for 1 with videos of white people being killed by cops. What percentage of people protesting understand that the disparity runs this way? In light of the belief that the disparity must run the other way, people are now quite happy to risk getting beaten and arrested by cops themselves, and to even loot and burn businesses. And most people and institutions are supporting this civil unrest from the sidelines, because they too imagine that cops are killing black people in extraordinary numbers. And all of this is calling forth an authoritarian response from Trump—and leading to more examples of police violence caught on video.

As I hope I’ve made clear, we need police reform—there’s no question about this. And some of the recent footage of the police attacking peaceful protests is outrageous. Nothing I just said should signify that I’m unaware of that. From what I’ve seen—and by the time I release this podcast, the character of all this might have changed—but, from what I’ve seen, the police were dangerously passive in the face of looting and real crime, at least in the beginning. In many cities, they just stood and watched society unravel. And then they were far too aggressive in the face of genuinely peaceful protests. This is a terrible combination. It is the worst combination. There’s no better way to increase cynicism and anger and fear, on all sides.

But racializing how we speak about the problem of police violence, where race isn’t actually the relevant variable—again, think of Tony Timpa— this has highly negative effects. First, it keeps us from talking about the real problems with police tactics. For instance, we had the recent case of Breonna Taylor who was killed in a so-called “no knock” raid of her home. As occasionally happens, in this carnival of moral error we call “the war on drugs,” the police had the wrong address, and they kicked in the wrong door. And they wound up killing a totally innocent woman. But this had nothing to do with race. The problem is not, as some commentators have alleged, that it’s not safe to be “sleeping while black.” The problem is that these no-knock raids are an obscenely dangerous way of enforcing despicably stupid laws. White people die under precisely these same circumstances, and very likely in greater numbers (I don’t have data specifically on no-knock raids, but we can assume that the ratio is probably conserved here).

Think about how crazy this policy is in a nation where gun ownership is so widespread. If someone kicks in your door in the middle of the night, and you’re a gun owner, of course you’re going to reach for your gun. That’s why you have a gun in the first place. The fact that people bearing down on you and your family out of the darkness might have yelled “police” (or might have not yelled “police”; it’s alleged in some of these cases that they don’t yell anything)—the fact that someone yells “police” isn’t necessarily convincing. Anyone can yell “police.” And, again, think of the psychology of this: If the police have the wrong house, and you know there is no reason on earth that real cops would take an interest in you, especially in the middle of the night, because you haven’t done anything (you’re not the guy running a meth lab)—and now you’re reaching for your gun in the dark—of course, someone is likely to get killed. This is not a racial issue. It’s a terrible policy.

Unfortunately, the process of police reform isn’t straightforward—and it is made massively more complicated by what’s happening now. Yes, we will be urging police reform in a very big way now, that much seems clear. But Roland Fryer [has also shown](https://www.nber.org/papers/w27324) that investigations of the cops, in a climate where viral videos and racial politics are operating, have dramatic effects, many of which are negative.

He studied the aftermath of the investigations into police misconduct that followed the killings Freddie Gray, Michael Brown, and Lequan McDonald, and found that, for reasons that seem pretty easy to intuit, proactive police contact with civilians decreases drastically, sometimes by as much 100 percent, once these investigations get started. This is now called “The Ferguson Effect.” The police still answer 911 calls, but they don’t investigate suspicious activity in the same way. They don’t want to wind up on YouTube. And when they alter their behavior like this, homicides go up. Fryer estimates that the effects of these few investigations translated into 1000 extra homicides, and almost 40,000 more felonies, over the next 24 months in the US. And, of course, most of the victims of those crimes were black. One shudders to imagine the size of the Ferguson effect we’re about to see nationwide… I’m sure the morale among cops has never been lower. I think it’s almost guaranteed that cops by the thousands will be leaving the force. And it will be much more difficult to recruit good people.

Who is going to want to be a cop now? Who could be idealist about occupying that role in society? It seems to me that the population of people who will become cops now will be more or less indistinguishable from the population of people who become prison guards. I’m pretty sure there’s a difference there, and I think we’re likely to see that difference expressed in the future. It’s a grim picture, unless we do something very creative here.

So there’s a real question about how we can reform police departments, and get rid of bad cops, without negatively impacting the performance of good cops? That’s a riddle we have to solve—or at least we have to understand what the trade-offs are here.

Why is all of this happening now? Police killings of civilians have gone way down. And they are rare events. They are 1/10,000 level events, if measured by arrests. 1/50-60,000 level events if measured by police encounters. And the number of unarmed people who are killed is smaller still. Around 50 last year, again, more were white than black. And not all unarmed victims are innocent. Some get killed in the act of attacking the cops.  [[EXAMPLE](https://www.arlnow.com/2015/05/19/breaking-officer-involved-shooting-in-buckingham/), [EXAMPLE](https://www.5newsonline.com/article/news/local/outreach/back-to-school/officer-involved-shooting-in-adair-county-oklahoma/527-e8cdc435-dcd0-429c-962f-b2c82c22068e), [EXAMPLE](https://www.miamiherald.com/news/local/crime/article36802032.html)]

Again, the data don’t tell a clean story, or the whole story. I see no reason to doubt that blacks get more attention from the cops—though, honestly, given the distribution of crime in our society, I don’t know what the alternative to that would be. And once the cops get involved, blacks are more likely to get roughed up, which is bad. But, again, it simply isn’t clear that racism is the cause. And contrary to everyone’s expectations, whites seem more likely to get killed by cops. Actually, one factor seems to be that whites are [7 times more likely](https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/116/32/15877.full.pdf) to commit “suicide by cop” (and [3 times more likely](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_09-508.pdf) to commit suicide generally). What’s going on there? Who knows?

There’s a lot we don’t understand about these data. But ask yourself, would our society seem less racist if the disparity ran the other way? Is less physical contact, but a greater likelihood of getting shot and killed a form of white privilege? Is a higher level of suicide by cop, and suicide generally, a form of white privilege? We have a problem here that, read either way, you can tell a starkly racist narrative.

We need ethical, professional policing, of course. But the places with the highest crime in our society need the most of it. Is there any doubt about that? In a city like Milwaukee, blacks are 12 times more likely to get murdered than whites [Not sure where I came by this number, probably a lecture or podcast. It appears the rate is closer to [20 times more likely](https://urbanmilwaukee.com/2015/01/12/gun-homicides-milwaukee-has-two-thirds-of-states-gun-killings/) and [22 times more likely](https://www.bu.edu/sph/2018/07/13/residential-segregation-associated-with-black-white-disparity-in-firearm-homicide-rates/) in Wisconsin as a whole—SH], again, they are being killed by other African Americans, nearly 100 percent of the time. I think the lowest figure I’ve seen is 93 percent of the time. [As noted above, more recent data suggest that it’s closer to 90 percent]. What should the police do about this? And what are they likely to do now that our entire country has been convulsed over one horrific case of police misconduct?

We need to lower the temperature on this conversation, and many other conversations, and understand what is actually happening in our society.

But instead of doing this, we now have a whole generation of social activists who seem eager to play a game of chicken with the forces of chaos. Everything I said about the problem of inequality and the need for reform stands. But I think that what we are witnessing in our streets, and on social media, and even in the mainstream press, is a version of mass hysteria. And the next horrific video of a black person being killed by cops won’t be evidence to the contrary. And there will be [another video](https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/17/us/rayshard-brooks-atlanta-shooting-wednesday/index.html). There are 10 million arrests every year. There will always be another video.

And the media has turned these videos into a form of political pornography. And this has deranged us. We’re now unable to speak or even think about facts. The media has been poisoned by bad incentives, in this regard, and social media doubly so.

In the mainstream of this protest movement, it’s very common to hear that the only problem with what is happening in our streets, apart from what the cops are doing, is that some criminal behavior at the margins—a little bit of looting, a little bit of violence—has distracted us from an otherwise necessary and inspiring response to an epidemic of racism. Most people in the media have taken exactly this line. People like Anderson Cooper on CNN or the editorial page of the New York Times or public figures like President Obama or Vice President Biden. The most prominent liberal voices believe that the protests themselves make perfect moral and political sense, and that movements like Black Lives Matter are guaranteed to be on the right side of history. How could anyone who is concerned about inequality and injustice in our society see things any other way? How could anyone who isn’t himself racist not support Black Lives Matter?

But, of course, there’s a difference between slogans and reality. There’s a difference between the branding of a movement and its actual aims. And this can be genuinely confusing. That’s why propaganda works. For instance, many people assume there’s nothing wrong with ANTIFA, because this group of total maniacs has branded itself as “anti-fascist.” What could be wrong with being anti-fascist? Are you pro fascism?

There’s a similar problem with Black Lives Matter—though, happily, unlike ANTIFA, Black Lives Matter actually seems committed to peaceful protest, which is hugely important. So the problem I’m discussing is more ideological, and it’s much bigger than Black Lives Matter—though BLM is its most visible symbol of this movement. The wider issue is that we are in the midst of a public hysteria and moral panic. And it has been made possible by a near total unwillingness, particularly on the Left, among people who value their careers and their livelihoods and their reputations, and fear being hounded into oblivion online—this is nearly everyone left-of-center politically. People are simply refusing to speak honestly about the problem of race and racism in America.

We are making ourselves sick. We are damaging our society. And by protesting the wrong thing, even the slightly wrong thing, and unleashing an explosion of cynical criminality in the process—looting that doesn’t even have the pretense of protest—the Left is empowering Trump, whatever the polls currently show. And if we are worried about Trump’s authoritarian ambitions, as I think we really should be, this is important to understand. He recently had what looked like paramilitary troops guarding the White House. I don’t know if we found out who those guys actually were, but that was genuinely alarming. But how are Democrats calls to “abolish the police” going to play to half the country that just watched so many cities get looted? We have to vote Trump out of office and restore the integrity of our institutions. And we have to make the political case for major reforms to deal with the problem of inequality—a problem which affects the black community most of all.

We need police reform; we need criminal justice reform; we need tax reform; we need health care reform; we need environmental reform—we need all of these things and more. And to be just, these policies will need to reduce the inequality in our society. If we did this, African Americans would benefit, perhaps more than any other group. But it’s not at all clear that progress along these dimensions primarily entails us finding and eradicating more racism in our society.

Just ask yourself, what would real progress on the problem of racism look like? What would utter progress look like?

Here’s what I think it would look like: More and more people (and ultimately all people) would care less and less (and ultimately not at all) about race. As I’ve said before in various places, skin color would become like hair color in its political and moral significance—which is to say that it would have none.

Now, maybe you don’t agree with that aspiration. Maybe you think that tribalism based on skin color can’t be outgrown or shouldn’t be outgrown. Well, if you think that, I’m afraid I don’t know what to say to you. It’s not that there’s nothing to say, it’s just there is so much we disagree about, morally and politically, that I don’t know where to begin. So that debate, if it can even be had, will have to be left for another time.

For the purposes of this conversation, I have to assume that you agree with me about the goal here, which is to say that you share the hope that there will come a time where the color of a person’s skin really doesn’t matter. What would that be like?

Well, how many blondes got into Harvard this year? Does anyone know? What percentage of the police in San Diego are brunette? Do we have enough red heads in senior management in our Fortune 500 companies? No one is asking these questions, and there is a reason for that. No one cares. And we are right not to care.

Imagine a world in which people cared about hair color to the degree that we currently care—or seem to care, or imagine that others care, or allege that they secretly care—about skin color. Imagine a world in which discrimination by hair color was a thing, and it took centuries to overcome, and it remains a persistent source of private pain and public grievance throughout society, even where it no longer exists. What an insane misuse of human energy that would be. What an absolute catastrophe.

The analogy isn’t perfect, for a variety of reasons, but it’s good enough for us to understand what life would be like if the spell of racism and anti-racism were truly broken. The future we want is not one in which we have all become passionate anti-racists. It’s not a future in which we are forever on our guard against the slightest insult—the bad joke, the awkward compliment, the tweet that didn’t age well. We want to get to a world in which skin color and other superficial characteristics of a person become morally and politically irrelevant. And if you don’t agree with that, what did you think Martin Luther King Jr was talking about?

And, finally, if you’re on the Left and don’t agree with this vision of a post-racial future, please observe that the people who agree with you, the people who believe that there is no overcoming race, and that racial identity is indissoluble, and that skin color really matters and will always matter—these people are white supremacists and neo-Nazis and other total assholes. And these are also people I can’t figure out how to talk to, much less persuade.

So the question for the rest of us—those of us who want to build a world populated by human beings, merely—the question is, how do we get there? How does racial difference become uninteresting? Can it become uninteresting by more and more people taking a greater interest in it? Can it become uninteresting by becoming a permanent political identity? Can it become uninteresting by our having thousands of institutions whose funding (and, therefore, very survival) depends on it remaining interesting until the end of the world?

Can it become less significant by being granted more and more significance? By becoming a fetish, a sacred object, ringed on all sides by taboos? Can race become less significant if you can lose your reputation and even your livelihood, at any moment, by saying one wrong word about it?

I think these questions answer themselves. To outgrow our obsession with racial difference, we have outgrow our obsession with race. And you don’t do that by maintaining your obsession with it.

Now, you might agree with me about the goal and about how a post-racial society would seem, but you might disagree about the path to get there—the question of what to do next. In fact, one podcast listener wrote to me recently to say that while he accepted my notion of a post-racial future, he thinks it’s just far too soon to talk about putting racial politics behind us. He asked me to imagine just how absurd it would have been to tell Martin Luther King Jr, at the dawn of the civil rights movement, that the path beyond racism requires that he become less and less obsessed with race.

That seems like a fair point, but Coleman Hughes has drawn my attention to a string of MLK quotes that seem to be just as transcendent of racial identity politics as I’m hoping to be here. You can [see these quotations](https://twitter.com/coldxman/status/1087593991976243200?lang=en) on his Twitter feed. None of those statements by King would make sense coming out of Black Lives Matter at the moment.

In any case, as I said, I think we are living in a very different time than Martin Luther King was. And what I see all around me is evidence of the fact that we were paying an intolerable price for confusion about racism, and social justice generally—and the importance of identity, generally—and this is happening in an environment where the path to success and power for historically disadvantaged groups isn’t generally barred by white racists who won’t vote for them, or hire them, or celebrate their achievements, or buy their products, and it isn’t generally barred by laws and policies and norms that are unfair. There is surely still some of that. But there must be less of it now than there ever was.

The real burden on the black community is the continued legacy of inequality—with respect to wealth, and education, and health, and social order—levels of crime, in particular, and resulting levels of incarceration, and single-parent families—and it seems very unlikely that these disparities, whatever their origin in the past, can be solved by focusing on problem of lingering racism, especially where it doesn’t exist. And the current problem of police violence seems a perfect case in point.

And yet now we’re inundated with messages from every well-intentioned company and organization singing from the same book of hymns. Black Lives Matter is everywhere. Of course, black lives matter. But the messaging of this movement about the reality of police violence is wrong, and it’s creating a public hysteria.

I just got a message from the American Association for the Advancement of Science talking about fear of the other. The quote from the email: “Left unchecked, racism, sexism, homophobia, and fear of the other can enter any organization or community – and destroy the foundations upon which we must build our future.” Ok, fine. But is that really the concern in the scientific community right now, “unchecked racism, sexism, and homophobia.” Is that really what ails science in the year 2020? I don’t think so.

I’ll tell you the fear of the other that does seem warranted, everywhere, right now. It’s the other who has rendered him or herself incapable of dialogue. It’s the other who will not listen to reason, who has no interest in facts, who can’t join a conversation that converges on the truth, because he knows in advance what the truth must be. We should fear the other who thinks that dogmatism and cognitive bias aren’t something to be corrected for, because they’re the very foundations of his epistemology.  We should fear the other who can’t distinguish activism from journalism or politics from science. Or worse, can make these distinctions, but refuses to. And we’re all capable of becoming this person. If only for minutes or hours at a time. And this is a bug in our operating system, not a feature. We have to continually correct for it.

One of the most shocking things that many of us learned when the Covid-19 pandemic was first landing on our shores, and we were weighing the pros and cons of closing the schools, was that for tens of millions of American kids, going to school represents the only guarantee of a decent meal on any given day. I’m pretty confident that most of the kids we’re talking about here aren’t white. And whatever you think about the opportunities in this country and whatever individual success stories you can call to mind, there is no question that some of us start on third base, or second base. Everyone has a lot to deal with, of course. Life is hard. But not everyone is a single mom, or single grandparent, struggling to raise kids in the inner city, all the while trying to keep them from getting murdered. The disparities in our society are absolutely heartbreaking and unacceptable. And we need to have a rational discussion about their actual causes and solutions.

We have to pull back from the brink here. And all we have with which to do that is conversation. And the only thing that makes conversation possible is an openness to evidence and arguments—a willingness to update one’s view of the world when better reasons are given. And that is an ongoing process, not a place we ever finally arrive.

Ok… Well, perhaps that was more of an exhortation than I intended, but it certainly felt like I needed to say it. I hope it was useful. And the conversations will continue on this podcast.

Stay safe, everyone.