

National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives



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PRESS RELEASE

April 24, 2018

My Truth About Being A Black Man And A Black Cop



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Guest Writer

As more and more shootings of unarmed black men and women are brought to the public's attention, I understand the distrust that many — especially people of color — have against police. As a black man, I've been on the receiving end of profiling and discrimination. As a father to black children, I've had to have “the talk” with them about how to conduct themselves in encounters with law enforcement to make sure they leave with their lives. But I'm also a cop, and I know this job is dangerous and difficult and it comes with its share of fair and unfair scrutiny.

I've spent the last 30 years reconciling these unique and conflicting identities. This effort was not without its struggle. I've tried to change the perspectives of people and officers around me, I've denied that I had differing perspectives of my own, I've tried to balance each identity and fit them into a safe — often false — narrative. All of these efforts failed.

Through these experiences, and those of so many officers and people of color, I've come to realize that the only way to reconcile these perspectives is to accept each experience and the truth they represent, and to allow them to co-exist. So, here are my truths.

“Real reconciliation can only occur when it starts with the truth, no matter the level of discomfort it may cause. The truth may hurt, but selective ignorance is fatal.”

I believe the vast majority of police officers do not engage in police brutality, but when tragedies such as the killing of unarmed black people occur, I question why so many of the victims are people who look like me. I've been racially profiled by the police. I've experienced discrimination in both my personal and professional life. I can't help but to wonder if these shootings, regardless of their legality, stem from implicit bias, our society's fear of black men, racism or a combination.

I see my children, especially my 20-year-old son, in the faces of the young men and women of color who have been killed by the police and who have been victims of police brutality. For black parents, teaching our children "what to do when stopped by the police" is a mandatory course for young people of color in this nation. I can't deny the reality that I have to protect my children from potentially deadly encounters with people whom I respect and who wear the same uniform that I wear.

And while it may be hard for everyday people to understand, I know firsthand the complex, challenging and dangerous nature of being a police officer. As a police chief, I've had to tell a wife that her husband, one of my fellow officers, was shot and killed in the line of duty. I've seen the emotional, physical and mental toll of the job weigh down my fellow officers. It has been an honor working side by side with so many selfless servants dedicated to helping others. I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of police officers in this country are brave and honorable public servants. But despite this, racial disparities still exist and there's a growing divide between officers and civilians along racial lines.

"Yes, we must accept that there are, in fact, some racist police officers. We must also acknowledge that the majority of cops are not racist and they honor the law enforcement profession."

In many ways the varying perspectives I face, and the conflicts they create, are not that different from the diversity of opinions we hear as a nation and the political discourse they have created around black lives and police brutality. In response to these differences, many choose to ignore, deny or try to change differing perspectives and the truths they represent rather than trying to understand varying viewpoints and reconcile our differences.

I tried to do this in my own life, and I've learned we cannot solve the problems we face concerning police and race if we continue to lie to ourselves about the nature of the problem. Real reconciliation can only occur when it starts with the truth, no matter how inconvenient it may be; no matter the level of discomfort it may cause. The truth may hurt, but selective ignorance is fatal.

We must learn the history of policing in this country and the role police have played in enforcing discriminatory laws. The truth is, significant racial disparities still exist in our policing and criminal justice systems. Many of the systems and practices in policing that exist today were designed in the 1950s and '60s to enforce discriminatory laws and oppress black Americans who are still being and feeling oppressed at this very moment.

Despite the efforts of good officers, the continued use of these draconian operational systems and practices allow structural racism to remain and spread, and it allows racist officers to operate with impunity. And yes, we must accept that there are, in fact, some racist police officers. We must also acknowledge that the vast majority of cops are not racist and they honor the law enforcement profession.

It is a dangerous job and officers face many challenges. The truth is far too many of our communities are plagued by violence that create legitimate dangers for both the police and people we serve. However, it's important to remember that race is not the cause of this community violence. The true cause is institutional racism, societal inequities in education and housing as well as law and order policies that use incarceration as a strategy for keeping the peace.

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Blaming the police alone for the inequities of the criminal justice system excuses prosecutors, judges, prison systems, health care disparities, lack of access to mental health services, poor education systems, etc. All of these systems contribute to the crime and violence in our neighborhoods and the overreliance on police to solve problems that extend well beyond our capacity.

Once we accept even these basic truths, it will become easier to work together rather than remain bitterly divided; to demand accountability from the entire justice system rather than just blame the police; and to develop real solutions to our problems instead of superficial responses to the symptoms.

Both the police and community are accountable for public safety. The police must be held accountable by the community and the community must be willing to hold itself accountable as well.

Such an effort requires all of us to take responsibility for our past and our future. And it requires an all-of-government response. White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders recently stated these issues are “a local matter.” Nothing can be further from the truth. The shooting of unarmed black men and women, police brutality and racial disparities in the criminal justice system represent a national crisis that requires a national response and presidential leadership. I'm a black man, a black father and a black cop. My struggle has not been to balance these perspectives, but to allow them to co-exist. The first step in reconciling these perspectives is to understand that each of these experiences, while different, are valid. Too often we try to either change, ignore or deny the truth. As Nelson Mandela said, “only the truth can put the past to rest.” Once we understand, accept and acknowledge the reality each perspective represents, maybe we can move forward to create a new truth — one in which justice is truly blind and all are treated equal under the law.

Ronald Davis is a 30-year police veteran and retired police chief, the former director of the United States Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS), and the executive director of President Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing.

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About the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives

Since 1976, The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE) has served as the conscience of law enforcement by being committed to justice by action. NOBLE represents over 3,000 members internationally, who are primarily African-American chief executive officers of law enforcement agencies at federal, state, county and municipal levels, other law enforcement administrators, and criminal justice practitioners. For more information, visit www.noblenational.org.

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