



WPS Statement on Racism and Excessive Police Force

Washington, DC (August 28, 2020) - Recent incidents of excessive police force underscore that systemic racism is a threat to public health and a barrier to our providing effective care to our patients. Racism must be opposed at all levels, but racism-motivated police violence is a crisis that calls for immediate action.

With regret, we acknowledge that over the years organized psychiatry and organized medicine have been affected by racial biases and structural racism that have delayed the achievement of diversity, impeded promising professional careers, and contributed to harmful treatment disparities. To be true to our mission as healers, we must be honest with ourselves in extinguishing our institutional racism.

The murder of George Floyd horrified the nation. It represented the culmination of the many recently publicized episodes of inappropriate and excessive force used by police resulting often in senseless death, and it endures as a metaphor of an unfeeling and sadistic authority crushing the soul of the disenfranchised and alienated. Such actions inflict psychological trauma, intensify feelings of helplessness and resentment, and undermine trust in our social institutions.

We know that many who work in law enforcement followed the noble desire to serve as guardians of the people. Thus, "the violence inflicted by police in news headlines today must be understood in relation to larger social and economic arrangements that put individuals and populations in harm's way. Police violence is a striking reflection of our American legacy of racism—a system that assigns value and structures opportunity while unfairly advantaging some and disadvantaging others based on their skin color."¹

We must correct the socioeconomic and institutional factors that underlie racism and drive excessive and inappropriate police use of force. We support the peaceful protests that have emerged worldwide and we value the work of the Black Lives Matter Movement that calls the world's attention to anti-Black racism.

However, excessive police force causes ongoing harm to people and damage to our society, so we must take action now. We support:

1. Expanding the law enforcement National Decertification Index to ensure that police officers who have acted illegally cannot be hired in other jurisdictions.

¹ Ehrenfeld, J.M. and Harris, P.A. Police Brutality Must Stop, 2020, American Medical Association, <https://www.ama-assn.org/about/leadership/police-brutality-must-stop>. Accessed August 27, 2020.

2. Reviewing hiring practices to include diagnostic evaluation of general medical, psychiatric, and psychological conditions. Prospective hires should undergo mental health risk assessment screening for bias to include gender and racial discrimination. The quality and consistency of training in community relations, crisis intervention, de-escalation, and intrinsic racial bias all need to be improved.
3. Requiring the deployment of specialized crisis intervention teams, with expertise in mental health, addictions, and de-escalation techniques, to manage domestic conflict and facilitate referral of the mentally ill to appropriate treatment settings.
4. Initiating a dialog between law enforcement and mental health professions in order to reexamine the military model of policing, explore together and advocate for science-based alternatives that build community, legitimacy and trust.

We fundamentally agree with the President's 2015 Task Force on 21st Century Policing which concludes that: "Trust between law enforcement agencies and the people they protect and serve is essential in a democracy. It is key to the stability of our communities, the integrity of our criminal justice system, and the safe and effective delivery of policing services."

This trust is vital for the mental health and well-being of all communities to include those who are the object of excessive and lethal police use of force, those who witness it via any available social media platforms, those who are concerned about the rights of others, and the perpetrators of this aggression and violence.

Board of Directors, Washington Psychiatric Society, 2020-2021