



# Hands Up, Don't Shoot: A Reflection of Present Day Racism and A Strive to Change

*Author(s)*

*Justin Marotta, MSW Candidate  
Simmons School of Social Work*

- January 24, 2004. Timothy Stansbury, 24. Brooklyn, New York. Unarmed.
- November 25, 2006. Sean Bell, 23. Queens, NY. Unarmed.
- January 1, 2009. Oscar Grant, 22. Oakland, California. Unarmed.
- March 20, 2010. Steve Eugene Washington, 27. Los Angeles, California. Unarmed.
- February 2, 2012. Ramarley Graham, 18. Bronx, New York. Unarmed.

On November 24th, a grand jury in Ferguson, MO, made the decision to not indict Darren Wilson, a white police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, on August 9th. In the wake of such a decision, many responded with disbelief, shock, and an overwhelming feeling of injustice. Many citizens, across the country, brought forth their voices with vigils, protests, and marches. Only days later, on December 3rd, Daniel Pantaleo, a white police officer, was not indicted by a grand jury after the killing of Eric Garner, a black male selling loose cigarettes.

White cop, unarmed black man killed. White cop, unarmed black man killed. White cop, unarmed black man killed. This phrase was ever present in my mind, day in and day out. Why is the institution of law enforcement, meant to protect and serve all, failing in the most horrifying of ways? Why are individuals within the institution not being held accountable for their actions? Why is Pantaleo walking free after being captured on video engaging in the homicide (as ruled by the medical examiner) of a black male via a chokehold prohibited by the NYPD? Vividly, I remember questioning not only the Eric Garner case indictment decision itself, but also the assumption there was no need for a true trial. It seemed that it was too risky for the judicial system to grant the opportunity for a proper jury to declare guilt or innocence.

Our nation is facing serious issues around racial inequality, violence, police brutality, and an imbalanced justice system. Systemic disenfranchisement of communities of color and constant marginalization, both implicit and explicit, are truths about our country.

Such recent events, however, are not only recent. Pervasive inequality, although mainstream media now, remains infused in our country's history. Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and many others, are the current faces of oppression, discrimination, and ubiquitous racism. These cases clearly echo a long-standing repression of black people from a corrupt institution of police officers.

While these events unfolded, students from the Simmons College School of Social Work were studying for finals while simultaneously carrying a heavy heart, myself included. I was hearing constant chatter and questioning of "What should we do? What can we do?"

Proud. That was my initial feeling as I embraced the dialogue happening within my social work cohort. Proud. That was how I felt in the collective joining of hands as we marched valiantly through Boston, peacefully protesting the injustices of the grand jury decisions and overall racial inequality. "We can't breathe" was chanted throughout the streets, representing Eric Garner's final words as the officer's chokehold left him gasping for oxygen. "Hands up, don't shoot" echoed throughout the streets, a symbol that represented solidarity.

I was proud, but I was not satisfied, nor should we be. We must not be disillusioned by the idea that such recent protests across the country have instilled change.

Stepping back, I realized what a momentous time this was to be a social work student. As a clinician in training, and having worked primarily with at-risk and minority youth in my hometown of Boston, MA, I felt the unwavering need to further illuminate racial disparities and inequalities. These issues are not only happening in Ferguson, MO and Staten Island, NY, but across our country, including Boston itself. We must remember, systemic racism holds no geographical limitations.

I was driven to show support, yet ambiguously unsure as to how to do so. As I was trying to conceptualize ways to facilitate an event, faculty and staff of Simmons College School of Social Work joined forces with Portland State University School of Social Work and Smith College School of Social Work in a call to action to stand against oppression and injustice. Students, professors, staff, deans, and provosts came together in our deep-rooted and personal commitment in taking a stand of solidarity. Speeches were given and a die-in was held, honoring black lives lost and a silent demand of justice against police brutality. Following was a protest around the quad, through public cafeterias, and around the outer school. Stopping on Fenway in front of the Main College Building, participants gathered on the main stairs to take a "Hands Up" photograph, solidifying our standing in solidarity against the mistreatment of minorities by the police.

Oppression, disenfranchisement, and racism have not been dismantled. We must keep working to move progress forward. The Black Lives Matter movement, a response to the anti-black racism that

permeates our society, is focused on the ways in which black people are deprived of basic human rights and dignity. This movement is just one way to sustain dialogue, enact change, and fight for racial equality.

Simmons SSW is determined to not simply say we have done enough. On April 24th, Stand Against Racism day, an event will be held to further explore the Black Lives Matter movement. The main focus is to further explore how social workers can be social organizers, how to continue to the movement without protests and marches, and what it means and looks like to be a part of the movement. A number of individuals are planned to speak including Toni Bee. Bee is a mother, activist, poet, and a prominent voice in the Black Lives Matter Cambridge, MA chapter. Additionally, black teen activists from the Boston community are coming to share their stories via spoken word. This event will be an open discussion, and all are invited to attend.

I feel compelled to end with a quote that has resonated with me recently: "History, despite its wrenching pain cannot be unlived, but if faced, with courage, need not be lived again" attributed to Maya Angelou in 1993. It is my hope that we begin to conceptualize change and make the steps to create change. May we not forget such injustices, as the media no longer highlights cases as breaking news, as this is breaking news everyday for black people. For black people, this has been a constant, persistent, and everyday part of life, and it needs to change in the most serious of ways.