

8.25.2014

The Honorable Barack Obama
President
United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue
Washington, DC 20500

DEAR PRESIDENT OBAMA:

In cities across America, local law enforcement units too often treat low-income neighborhoods populated by African Americans and Latinos as if they are military combat zones instead of communities where people strive to live, learn, work, play and pray in peace and harmony. Youth of color, black boys and men especially, who should be growing up in supportive, affirming environments are instead presumed to be criminals and relentlessly subjected to aggressive police tactics that result in unnecessary fear, arrests, injuries, and deaths.

Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teen shot multiple times and killed by a Ferguson, MO police officer, is only the latest in a long list of black men and boys who have died under eerily similar circumstances. Investigations into the Ferguson shooting are ongoing, and many of the specific facts remain unclear for now. However, the pattern is too obvious to be a coincidence and too frequent to be a mistake. From policing to adjudication and incarceration, it is time for the country to counter the effects of systemic racial bias, which impairs the perceptions, judgment, and behavior of too many of our law enforcement personnel and obstructs the ability of our police departments and criminal justice institutions to protect and serve all communities in a fair and just manner.

In addition, the militarization of police departments across the country is creating conditions that will further erode the trust that should exist between residents and the police who serve them. The proliferation of machine guns, silencers, armored vehicles and aircraft, and camouflage in local law enforcement units does not bode well for police-community relations, the future of our cities, or our country.

And surely neither systemic racial bias nor police department militarization serves the interests of the countless police officers who bravely place their lives at risk every day.

In light of these dangerous trends, we, the undersigned, call on the Administration to pursue the following actions:

Training: Racial bias is real. Whether implicit or explicit, it influences perceptions and behaviors and can be deadly. Law enforcement personnel in every department in the country, under guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), should be required to undergo racial bias training as a part of ongoing professional development and training.

Accountability: Police departments should not be solely responsible for investigating themselves. These departments are funded by the public and should be accountable to the public. Enforceable accountability measures must be either established or reexamined for impartiality in circumstances where police shoot unarmed victims. DOJ must set and implement national standards of investigation that are democratic (involving independent review boards broadly representative of the community served), transparent, and enforceable.

Diversity: Police department personnel should be representative of the communities they serve. Police departments must adopt personnel practices that result in the hiring and retention of diverse law enforcement professionals. Using diversity best practices established in other sectors, DOJ must set, implement, and monitor diversity hiring and retention guidelines for local police departments.

Engagement: Too often law enforcement personnel hold stereotypes about black and brown youth and vice versa. Lack of familiarity breeds lack of understanding and increased opportunities for conflict. Police departments must break through stereotypes and bias by identifying regular opportunities for constructive and quality engagement with youth living in the communities they serve. The Administration can authorize support for youth engagement activity under existing youth grants issued by DOJ.

Demilitarization: Deterring crime and protecting communities should not involve military weaponry. Effective policing strategies and community relationships will not be advanced if police departments continue to act as an occupying force in neighborhoods. The Administration must suspend programs that transfer military equipment into the hands of local police departments and create guidelines that regulate and monitor the use of military equipment that has already been distributed.

Examination and Change: It is possible to create police departments that respect, serve and protect all people in the community regardless of age, race, ethnicity, national origin, physical and mental ability, gender, faith, or class. The Administration must quickly establish a national commission to review existing police policies and practices and identify the best policies and practices that can prevent more Fergusons and vastly improve policing in communities across the nation.

Oversight: If somebody isn't tasked with ensuring the implementation of equitable policing in cities across the country, then no one will do the job. The Administration must appoint a federal Czar, housed in the U.S. Department of Justice, who is specifically tasked with promoting the professionalization of local law enforcement, monitoring egregious law enforcement activities, and adjudicating suspicious actions of local law enforcement agencies that receive federal funding.

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