

For Disabled Black Americans, Police Violence Highlights the Intersecting Threat of Racism and Ableism

Credit, from left: Lesley Marin/Twitter, American Association of People with Disabilities/Twitter

By (60055) (58069)

Updated: 6:00 AM PDT, July 17, 2020

First Published: 8:19 AM PDT, July 15, 2020

Around 11 million disabled Black Americans and their families live with a daily fear of encountering police violence.

In 2016, a photo of a large sign posted outside of a suburban Nevada home went viral. The first part of the sign read, in all caps and partly underlined, “Attention! An autistic man lives here. He does not know what a cop is or what a gun is. He makes loud noises. He will not hurt u!”

Tacked underneath the first sign, almost as if an afterthought, were two more signs: “He does not understand words or commands!!!” and “Oh yes: he is Black too.”

The woman who wrote and put up these signs, Judy McKim, **told KTNV** that they were inspired by an earlier incident of police violence against her autistic son, Zach. She said that while she didn’t enjoy the attention the viral post has brought her, she felt she had no choice.

“I don't like doing this,” McKim said. “I'm embarrassed. I'm embarrassed that everyone knows, I'm embarrassed that I'm on TV. I'm embarrassed that you guys are seeing my life, but that's reality.”

Fast forward four years and a mass movement against police violence unlike any other in history has mobilized in the wake of the police killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. This reality is one disabled Black people and their loved ones face on a daily basis, due to the intersecting threats of racism and ableism.

According to the disability rights organization the **Ruderman Family Foundation**, as many as half of the people killed by police in the U.S. were disabled. The Guardian found that Black (and Native) Americans are not only **disproportionately killed by the police**, but they are also **more likely to be disabled** than white Americans. As a result, people like Zach and Judy McKim, along with around 11 million disabled Black Americans and their families, live with a daily fear of encountering police violence.

That **fear has been amplified** in the wake of the spate of recent police and vigilante killings that have **captured the nation's attention**. In an interview with **Forbes** last month, Kim Kaiser said George Floyd's killing has raised new worries for her 14-year-old disabled son. "He said to me, 'Mommy, are you going to be here to save me when the police put a knee on my neck? Because George Floyd called for his mommy. What would happen if I called for my mommy?'"

For disability rights lawyer Haben Girma, disabled Black people like her are targets for a law enforcement system that is shaped by biases that reflect a society conditioned by racism and ableism. "Police can't see I'm Deafblind. They might see my involuntary eye movements and assume criminality. If I'm with my sweet guide dog Mylo, they might expect me to have superb hearing and assume I'm a threat when I don't respond to their commands. I'm horrified by the amount of sheer luck needed for a Deafblind Black woman to stay alive," she told Inside Edition Digital.

Police violence against disabled populations is fueled by a "compliance culture" inherent to law enforcement, who typically expect rigid and uniform compliance to their orders, Girma said. A 2018 **BBC** story recounts the incident that led to the death of Adam Trammell, a Milwaukee man who had schizophrenia, after a neighbor called 911 during one of his episodes: "According to his father, Larry Trammell, Adam often had delusions and hallucinations. He would take showers to help him calm down when he felt anxious. Adam was not armed and he did not appear to behave in a threatening manner. But he did not leave the shower as the police commanded." Responders went on to taze and sedate Adam, who stopped breathing and died.

For advocates, this kind of systemic response is magnified against Black disabled people, who they say police are predisposed to be violent toward. Talila A. Lewis, a lawyer and director of Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of Deaf Communities (**HEARD**), told **TIME** that government institutions

like law enforcement use “constructed ideas about disability, delinquency and dependency, intertwined with constructed ideas about race to classify and criminalize people.”

Because the issue is structural, advocates say it extends beyond just law enforcement and criminalization. “We should be just as appalled & outraged by the starvation & murder of #MichaelHickson by doctors as we are at the murder of #GeorgeFloyd by police,” disabled activist [Amanda Siebe recently tweeted](#).

Michael Hickson, a quadriplegic Black man who was hospitalized with COVID-19, died last month at a Texas hospital after, his wife Melissa said, attending doctors determined “his quality of life—he doesn’t have much of one” and discontinued his access to hydration, food and treatment for six days until he died. Melissa told [The Washington Post](#) that she worries hospital staff didn’t value her husband’s life because he was Black and disabled.

DeVry Anderson, the chief medical officer at St. David's South Austin Medical Center said in [a statement](#) that the hospital exhausted all options in treating Mr. Hickson, who he says was very ill with "a number of complications," like aspiration, which Anderson maintains was "causing his respiratory condition to worsen, [which] was the reason his tube feedings were discontinued.” Anderson went on to address Melissa’s concerns. “Some people want the public to believe that we took the position that Mr. Hickson’s life wasn’t worth being saved, and that is absolutely wrong. It wasn’t medically possible to save him.”

Hickson’s case brought conversations on medical racism, medical ableism, and how disability interacts with police and the criminal justice system back into the spotlight. Alejandrina Guzman, a disability justice activist, tweeted [“Not only is this medical racism and ableism, it is also eugenics”](#) after he died. Black comedy writer Nicolas Grant [came forward with his story](#) about how, when his mental health improved, he said, he was sent to a psych ward by his employer for calling out racism in the workplace. Tyla Grant, a Black autistic YouTuber, set up a neurodiversity assessment fund to help Black people get diagnoses, after sharing her [long journey of being labeled as a “naughty child.”](#)

Girma believes that “centering the experiences of Black disabled people will help us reach a solution” to these widespread structural issues. “‘Nothing about us without us,’ is the saying of the disability rights movement,” Girma

said. “Listen to disability advocates. Design physical and virtual spaces for disability access.” There is already a push to require **disability training in medical school, for better representation in media**, and social media movements like #BlackDisabledLivesMatter, #BlackAutisticLivesMatter and #AdaptTheFeed have gained significant traction.

In response to police violence, there’s an overwhelming interest in the longstanding movements to **defund** and **abolish** law enforcement. Advocates say both models are especially imperative for disabled people. “Cities should divest funding from the police to invest in caring for communities. Fewer people would commit crimes if we increase access to healthcare, housing, and other critical social services,” Girma said.

For both advocates of divestment from police, and complete abolitionists, keeping police out of mental health crises and disabled people out of law enforcement situations is often central to the movement. For those advocating for defunding, this means diverting the police resources towards **crisis workers and social services**. For **disabled abolitionists**, this means dismantling institutions which they say routinely cause marginalized people harm, like police, prisons and mental institutions.

And in order to do that, advocates say it’s imperative that disabled people are centered at every juncture, which makes space for equity and empowerment.

“In an ableist society, disabled people are framed as vulnerable,” Girma notes. “We are vulnerable IN an ableist society. Calling us vulnerable perpetuates the status quo, but calling the society ableist draws more attention to the systems causing us harm. We need more people to recognize ableism and work to dismantle it.”