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Police Violence Against Black Disabled People Can't Be Ignored Anymore

Both Black and disabled Americans experience police brutality at high rates. So why is the plight of Black disabled Americans an afterthought?

By Elyse Wanshel

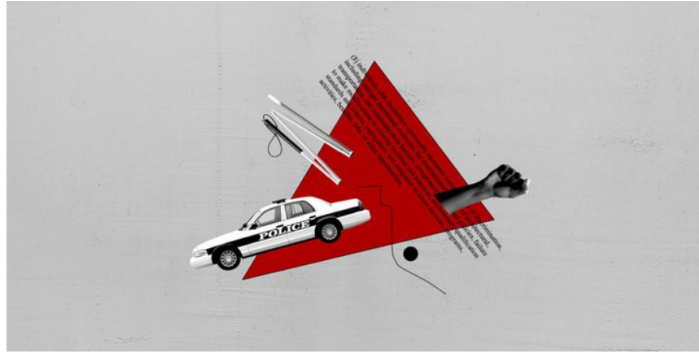


ILLUSTRATION: REBECCA ZISSER/HUFFPOST; PHOTOS: GETTY

Pearl Pearson Jr. was driving home from a Starbucks in Oklahoma City in 2014 when he noticed police lights flashing behind him. Oklahoma Highway Patrol troopers suspected him of being involved in a hit-and-run, but Pearson — a then-64-year-old Deaf Black man whom his daughter described as “gentle and kind” — had no idea why he was being pulled over.

He parked his car and placed his hands on the steering wheel as a trooper approached his vehicle with a gun drawn. Pearson couldn't hear what the trooper was saying and reached for a placard he kept in his car that explained his disability. But before he could grab it, the trooper punched him in the face.

Pearson was dragged from his car, severely beaten and put in a chokehold; one of his arms was ripped from its socket. He experienced brain and eye damage from the encounter, but he survived.



Deborah Danner was a 66-year-old Black woman with schizophrenia. [In 2016, an NYPD officer shot her](#) in her Bronx apartment while responding to her neighbor's call that she had been behaving erratically. She did not survive.

Chillingly, Danner [wrote an essay](#) four years before her death about the dangers of people with mental health conditions interacting with police that predicted her fate.

“We are all aware of the all too frequent news stories about the mentally ill who come up against law enforcement instead of mental health professionals,” she wrote. “And end up dead.”

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The circumstances of Danner's death echo those of Breonna Taylor's. Louisville, Kentucky, police officers shot the EMT eight times in March after [bursting into her home on a "no-knock warrant"](#) related to a drug investigation.

Pearson's story shares DNA with so many other stories about police violence toward Black people at traffic stops, like [Philando Castile](#) and [Maurice Gordon](#).

Yet conversations and media coverage surrounding both [Pearson](#) and [Danner](#)'s cases zeroed in on their disabilities and largely treated their race as irrelevant.

Conversely, prominent victims of police brutality like [Sandra Bland](#), [Freddie Gray](#), [Eric Garner](#), [Elijah McClain](#) and [Tanisha Anderson](#) all had disabilities or underlining health issues that may have played significant roles in their deaths — yet these aspects of their identities tend to get glossed over.



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Sandra Bland's mother, Geneva Reed-Veal, talks with reporters in March 2016 after an arraignment hearing for former Texas state trooper Brian Encinia, who had [pulled Bland over](#) in July 2015 for not signaling. Bland — who had [depression and epilepsy](#) — was arrested, couldn't make bail, and three days later was found hanged in her jail cell. A perjury charge against Encinia [was dropped](#) in 2017 despite the evidence from a recording of their exchange.

In cases of police violence against Black disabled people, the media tends to focus on either the victim's race or the victim's disability, instead of examining the overlap between the two identities, said Vilissa Thompson, a Black disabled social worker and activist who is a consultant for the [Movement 4 Black Lives](#). This gives the public an incomplete story.

The "erasure of people's disabilities when we talk about them" is a major issue when it comes to Black disabled victims of police violence, Thompson told HuffPost. "Either the complete erasure or omission, or leaving it as a footnote and not understanding the connection between race [and] disability ... and who is being disproportionately impacted within the Black and disabled communities."

“**Both people of color and people with disabilities are more likely to come in contact with law enforcement. And both groups have higher chances of negative things happening as a result.**

—Britney Wilson, a Black disabled civil rights attorney

There is no reliable national database tracking how many Black disabled people experience and die from police violence. In fact, there's not even a public federal database tracking [who dies in police custody in general](#). But the data we do have sheds some light on how the combination of being Black and disabled may have dire consequences when interacting with law enforcement.

In 2015, The Washington Post [began work on a real-time database](#) that tracks fatal police shootings. A [2016 report by the Post](#) compared that data with the most recently available U.S. census figures and found that Black Americans were 2.5 times more likely than white people to be shot and killed by law enforcement.

And the Ruderman Foundation, a philanthropic foundation with a focus on disability advocacy, has estimated that [one-third to one-half of all people killed by police](#) are disabled.



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SOPA IMAGES VIA GETTY IMAGES

A Black Lives Matter protester in a wheelchair leads others in chanting during a rally outside New York City Hall in July.

The brutal [killing of George Floyd](#) has sparked nationwide protests and heated conversations about racial justice and police violence over the past few months. But the issue of disability has been largely ignored, even though disability can increase a person's risk of death or injury by police, especially if that person is also Black.

For instance, the movements and actions of disabled people can be misinterpreted as out of the ordinary or threatening to law enforcement.

Heather Watkins, a Black disabled activist based in Boston, gave the example of how police could easily misinterpret the speech patterns of someone who has cerebral palsy.

"[If] they're talking, then someone might consider them drunk," Watkins said. "I've had friends who have cerebral palsy that say that they've been targeted for appearing inebriated."

Police interactions can turn dangerous when a disabled person cannot immediately respond to an officer's demands for compliance the same way that a non-disabled person would. And when law enforcement's default is to respond violently to someone who doesn't immediately obey demands, a disabled person is certainly at risk. For a Black disabled person, this risk is compounded by biased officers' [perception of them as more threatening](#) than non-Black people.

Disabled people also often face indifference — from police, courts and the general public — about the legal rights afforded to them by the [Americans with Disabilities Act](#), which prohibits discrimination against disabled people, [including discrimination by police](#).

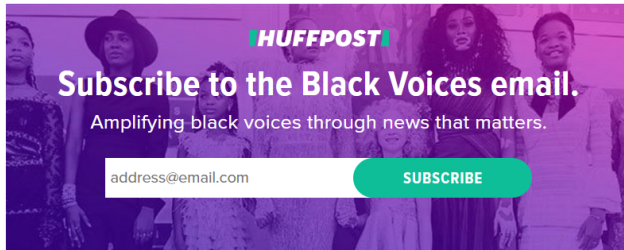
"I've been in court cases where lawyers — police brutality lawyers — had no clue about the Americans with Disabilities Act," said Leroy Moore, a Black disabled activist who is the chair of the [Black Disability Studies Committee for the National Black Disability Coalition](#). "The ADA doesn't count in court cases around police brutality. And if it does, it gets thrown out constantly."





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A photo of the “[Capitol Crawl](#)” on March 12, 1990. While fighting for passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act, protesters got out of their wheelchairs and climbed the 78 marble steps up the Capitol’s west front.



Black Americans are five times as likely as white Americans to say they’ve been unfairly stopped by police because of their race, [according to a 2019 Pew survey](#).

Disabled people also wind up encountering police even though they are not posing a threat. They get the cops called on them for what others perceive as strange behavior or by family, friends or neighbors requesting so-called wellness checks on their mental health condition. In numerous instances, these situations have [ended up deadly](#) for people with disabilities.

“Both people of color and people with disabilities are more likely to come in contact with law enforcement,” said Britney Wilson, a Black disabled civil rights attorney. “And both groups have higher chances of negative things happening as a result.”

Lisa “Tiny” Gray-Garcia, founder of [Poor Magazine](#) and a self-described “formerly houseless incarcerated” person, told HuffPost that the tendency to silo a victim’s identities is “absolutely idiotic.”

“The connection or the intersectionality of disability, racism, white terrorism and poverty are almost always interlinked,” she said.

Black Americans are, in fact, more likely than white Americans to be disabled, [according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#). Due to centuries of systemic racism, Black Americans tend to [make less money](#) and therefore are more likely to live in less affluent neighborhoods. These communities often have [worse access to health care](#), [worse access to healthy food](#), worse air quality and other [environmental factors](#) that contribute to residents developing disabilities, mental health conditions and other health issues.

Black Americans also often don’t have access to [unbiased medical and mental health care](#). Because of this and the barriers to health care in general, disabilities and other health conditions that Black Americans develop can go undiagnosed and untreated.

And the fight for justice is harder when Black disabled people feel they are not fully accepted by either the Black or the disability community.

“We don’t feel safe in either community because we experience harm by both communities,” said Thompson, who created the Twitter hashtag #DisabilityTooWhite four years ago. “In many ways, where do we belong? We have the disabled community where the white folks or non-people-of-color can be anti-Black or racist, and you have the Black community where Black folks are [ableist](#). So where do we (A) fit? And (B) feel safe enough to even proclaim that our lives matter too?”

“
If you want me to go back to the slave trade, we were brought here based on our ability to produce. That’s something that inherently links race and ability. That’s the function of capitalism, it’s instinctively and intrinsically tied to race and ability.


—Britney Wilson

Thompson said she’s experienced racism from white disabled activists.

“There’s not one big answer for everything. It’s the small things that are going to make it happen,” Moore said. “So there’s the solution — educating the community about mental health, about disability, about the ADA, about being a neighbor, about reshaping your disabled neighbor as a person.”

Gray-Garcia underscored that the situation is messy and it will take all people — regardless of race, ability, gender or class — to do the hard work needed to create change.

“It’s a mind shift,” she said. “It’s not a simple answer. And that’s the hardest part. Because you’re looking for a nice clean line for your story. But ... it’s a complicated, multilayered process of unpacking 527 years of genocide, lies, racism and murdering. You do not get over that in one day.”

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