

11 Major Misconceptions About the Black Lives Matter Movement

Since the acquittal of Trayvon Martin's killer in 2013 and the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, the phrase "black lives matter" has become a rallying cry for a new chapter in the long black freedom struggle. But this new movement's penchant for disruptive protest and impassioned public speeches about persistent racial inequality have been disconcerting to many Americans who wonder what the end-game is for this new generation of protesters. Do black lives matter more than white lives? bystanders ask. Why can't black people simply address the crime problem in their own communities? others want to know. And if the problems are really this bad, can't voting for new political leaders solve them? sympathizers wonder. These are just some of the many questions surrounding this new movement. But the young people taking to the streets in protest have a righteous cause. They deserve a fair hearing. And we can begin by debunking a few myths about what the Black Lives Matter movement is and what it isn't.

1. The movement doesn't care about black-on-black crime.

The idea that black-on-black crime is not a significant political conversation among black people is patently false. In Chicago, long maligned for its high rates of intraracial murder, members of the community created the Violence Interrupters to disrupt violent altercations before they escalate. However, those who insist on talking about black-on-black crime frequently fail to acknowledge that most crime is intraracial. Ninety-three percent of black murder victims are killed by other black people. Eighty-four percent of white murder victims are killed by other white people. The continued focus on black-on-black crime is a diversionary tactic, whose goal is to suggest that black people don't have the right to be outraged about police violence in vulnerable black communities, because those communities have a crime problem. The Black Lives Matter movement acknowledges the crime problem, but it refuses to locate that crime problem as a problem of black pathology. Black people are not inherently more violent or more prone to crime than other groups. But black people are disproportionately poorer, more likely to be targeted by police and arrested, and more likely to attend poor or failing schools. All of these social indicators place one at greater risk for being either a victim or a perpetrator of violent crime. To reduce violent crime, we must fight to change systems, rather than demonizing people.

2. It's a leaderless movement.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a leaderfull movement. Many Americans of all races are enamored with Martin Luther King as a symbol of leadership and what real movements look like. But the Movement for Black Lives, another name for the BLM movement, recognizes many flaws with this model. First, focusing on heterosexual, cisgender black men frequently causes us not to see the significant amount of labor and thought leadership that black women provide to movements, not only in caretaking and auxiliary roles, but on the front lines of protests and in the strategy sessions that happen behind closed doors. Moreover, those old models leadership favored the old over the young, attempted to silence gay and lesbian leadership, and did not recognize the leadership possibilities of transgender people at all. Finally, a movement with a singular leader or a few visible leaders is vulnerable, because those leaders can be easily identified, harassed, and killed, as was the case with Dr. King. By having a leaderfull movement, BLM addresses many of these concerns. BLM is composed of many local leaders and many local organizations including Black

Youth Project 100, the Dream Defenders, the Organization for Black Struggle, Hands Up United, Millennial Activists United, and the Black Lives Matter national network. We demonstrate through this model that the movement is bigger than any one person. And there is room for the talents, expertise, and work ethic of anyone who is committed to freedom.

3. The movement has no agenda.

Many believe the Black Lives Matter movement has no agenda — other than yelling and protesting and disrupting the lives of white people. This is also false. Since the earliest days of the movement in Ferguson, groups like the Organization for Black Struggle, the Black Lives Matter network, and others have made both clear and public a list of demands. Those demands include swift and transparent legal investigation of all police shootings of black people; official governmental tracking of the number of citizens killed by police, disaggregated by race; the demilitarization of local police forces; and community accountability mechanisms for rogue police officers. Some proposals like the recently launched Campaign Zero by a group of Ferguson activists call for body cameras on every police officer. But other groups are more reticent about this solution, since it would lead to increased surveillance and possible invasions of privacy, not to mention a massive governmental database of information about communities of color that are already heavily under surveillance by government forces.

4. It's a one-issue movement.

Although it is true that much of the protesting to date has been centered on the issue of police brutality, there is a range of issues that movement work will likely push in years to come. One is the issue of our failing system of public education, which is a virtual school-to-prison pipeline for many black youth. Another is the complete dismantling of the prison industrial complex. Many of the movement's organizers identify as abolitionists, which in the 21st-century context refers to people who want to abolish prisons and end the problem of mass incarceration of black and Latino people. Three other significant issues are problems with safe and affordable housing, issues with food security, and reproductive justice challenges affecting poor women of color and all people needing access to reproductive care. As I frequently like to tell people, this movement in its current iteration is just over a year old. Give it some time to find its footing and its take on all the aforementioned issues. But the conversations are on the table, largely because many of the folks doing on-the-ground organizing came to this work through their organizing work around other issues.

5. The movement has no respect for elders.

The BLM movement is an intergenerational movement. Certainly there have been schisms and battles between younger and older movers about tactics and strategies. There has also been criticism from prior civil rights participants. There is a clear rejection of the respectability politics ethos of the civil rights era, namely a belief in the idea that proper dress and speech will guard against harassment by the police. This is a significant point of tension within black communities, because in a system that makes one feel powerless to change it, belief in the idea that a good job, being well-behaved, and having proper dress and comportment will protect you from the evils of racism feels like there's something you can do to protect yourself, that there's something you can do to have a bit of control over your destiny. This movement patently rejects such thinking in the face of massive evidence of police mistreatment of black people of all classes and backgrounds. All people should be treated with dignity and respect, regardless of how one looks or speaks. If you ever have occasion to attend a protest action, you will see black people of all ages, from the very young to the very old, standing in solidarity with the work being done.

6. The black church has no role to play.

Many know that the black church was central to the civil rights movement, as many black male preachers became prominent civil rights leaders. This current movement has a very different relationship to the church than movements past. Black churches and black preachers in Ferguson have been on the ground helping since the early days after Michael Brown's death. But protesters patently reject any conservative theology about keeping the peace, praying copiously, or turning the other cheek. Such calls are viewed as a return to passive respectability politics. But local preachers and pastors like Rev. Traci Blackmon, Rev. Starsky Wilson, and Rev. Osagyefo Sekou have emerged as what I call "Movement Pastors." With their radical theologies of inclusion and investment in preaching a revolutionary Jesus (a focus on the parts of scripture where Jesus challenges the Roman power structure rather than the parts about loving one's enemies) and their willingness to think of church beyond the bounds of a physical structure or traditional worship, they are reimagining what notions of faith and church look like, and radically transforming the idea of what the 21st-century black church should be.

7. The movement does not care about queer or trans lives.

The opening presenter at the first national convening of the Movement for Black Lives in Cleveland this summer was Elle Hearn, a trans black woman organizer from Ohio. That she was collectively chosen to open the proceedings was a deliberate choice to center both women and queer and trans people as movement leaders. This is a clear break from prior racial justice movement politics. Not only does the Movement for Black Lives embrace queer and trans black people, but it has been at the forefront of efforts to highlight our national epidemic of murders of trans women of color. This year alone, we have had nearly 20 murders. Moreover, the movement does not merely give token representation to queer and trans people. Two of the founders of the Black Lives Matter network, Patrisse Cullors and Alicia Garza, are queer black women. And queer and trans black people are not called in merely to discuss queer and trans issues. They are at the table, on the stage, in the protests. These moves have not been without their challenges, and the movement has had to deal with queer and trans antagonism both from the broader public and within movement spaces. But there is a fundamental belief that when we say Black Lives Matter, we mean all black lives matter.

8. The movement hates white people.

The statement "black lives matter" is not an anti-white proposition. Contained within the statement is an unspoken but implied "too," as in "black lives matter, too," which suggests that the statement is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. However, those white people who continue to mischaracterize the affirmation of the value of black life as being anti-white are suggesting that in order for white lives to matter, black lives cannot. That is a foundational premise of white supremacy. It is antithetical to what the Black Lives Matter movement stands for, which is the simple proposition that "black lives also matter." The Black Lives Matter movement demands that the country affirm the value of black life in practical and pragmatic ways, including addressing an increasing racial wealth gap, fixing public schools that are failing, combating issues of housing inequality and gentrification that continue to push people of color out of communities they have lived in for generations, and dismantling the prison industrial complex. None of this is about hatred for white life. It is about acknowledging that the system already treats white lives as if they have more value, as if they are more worthy of protection, safety, education, and a good quality of life than black lives are. This must change.

9. The movement hates police officers.

Police officers are people. Their lives have inherent value. This movement is not an anti-people movement; therefore it is not an anti-police-officer movement. Most police officers are just everyday people who want to do their jobs, make a living for their families, and come home safely at the end of their shift. This does not mean, however, that police are not implicated in a system that criminalizes black people, that demands that they view black people as unsafe and dangerous, that trains them to be more aggressive and less accommodating with black citizens, and that does not stress that we are taxpayers who deserve to be protected and served just like everyone else. Thus the Black Lives Matter movement is not trying to make the world more unsafe for police officers; it hopes to make police officers less of a threat to communities of color. Thus, we reject the idea that asking officers questions about why one is being stopped or arrested, about what one is being charged with, constitutes either disrespect or resistance. We reject the use of military-grade weapons as appropriate policing mechanisms for any American community. We reject the faulty idea that disrespect is a crime, that black people should be nice or civil when they are being hassled or arrested on trumped-up charges. And we question the idea that police officers should be given the benefit of the doubt when it comes to policing black communities. Increasingly, the presence of police makes black people feel less rather than more safe. And that has everything to do with the antagonistic and power-laden ways in which police interact with citizens more generally and black citizens in particular. Therefore, police officers must rebuild trust with the communities they police. Not the other way around.

10. The movement's primary goal should be the vote.

Recently the Democratic National Committee endorsed the Black Lives Matter movement. The BLM network swiftly rejected that endorsement. While voting certainly matters, particularly in local municipalities like Ferguson, movement members are clear that voting for policies and politicians whose ultimate goal is to maintain a rotten and unjust system is counterproductive. Thus the movement cares about national politics, and many participants have sought to make presidential candidates responsive to their political concerns. However, there is deep skepticism about whether the American system is salvageable, because it is so deeply rooted in ideas of racial caste. In this regard, the BLM movement, together with the Occupy movement of years past, is causing a resurgence of a viable, visible, and vocal (black) left in national politics. Moving some issues of import onto the 2016 election agenda should therefore be viewed as a tactic, not a goal. The goal is freedom and safety for all black lives. And that goal is much bigger than one election.

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Until Bernie Sanders sought the attention of Black Lives Matter participants, many were wont to acknowledge that a new racial justice movement even existed. For the record, since August 2014, more than 1,030 protest actions have been held in the name of Black Lives Matter. A new generation of protest music has come forth with songs from Janelle Monae, Prince, J. Cole, Lauryn Hill, and Rick Ross. The first national convening in July drew over 1,000 participants. There is a new consciousness and a new spirit seeking justice, and the participants carrying the torch show no signs of slowing down.

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