

Racial Justice and Building Peace in the United States

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**THE BAIL
PROJECT**



MARY HOCH
Center for
Reconciliation



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Conflict and violence are on the rise in the United States. Black Americans and people of color continue to bear the brunt of this violence and injustice. The historical impact of slavery, genocide, racist policies, police brutality, and the unconscious and conscious biases toward Black Americans and people of color has contributed to the pain felt by many in the U.S. Structural racism has compiled, compounded, and adapted in various institutions and policies to benefit white Americans while also making it difficult for many Black Americans and people of color to survive and advance in society. Among the most visible are the financial, judicial, housing, immigration and education systems, which have not only allowed white Americans to retain a higher socioeconomic status but also shut out Black Americans and people of color from participating in the democratic processes offered by the U.S.

But the news is not all bad. In response to deepening political polarization and racial division, as well as the pandemic and increasing income inequality, local communities across the U.S. are leading movements, such as Black Lives Matter, or are unified by its rallying cry to address the root causes of the violence they are experiencing.

Peace Direct, The Bail Project, Activate Labs, +Peace, and The Mary Hoch Center for Reconciliation invited local activists, changemakers, organizers, healers, and peacebuilders to a conversation on racism and justice in the United States. This report presents the key findings and recommendations developed from the consultation. Participants could remain anonymous in the forum and this report.

KEY FINDINGS

1. In 1996, Congress established the 1033 Program through the U.S. Department of Defense, which transferred more than \$7.2 billion of military-grade equipment to law enforcement agencies. There is a statistically significant correlation between militarization due to this program and fatalities from officer-involved shootings, which disproportionately affect Black Americans and people of color. The consultation found that military-grade equipment contributes to the mindset that use of force helps maintain “order” in communities, perpetuating a system in which police are above the law.
2. Ending mass incarceration of Black Americans and people of color requires addressing the full cycle from entry, incarceration, and reintegration at a local level and through state and federal policy change. The mass incarceration system disproportionately targets Black Americans and people of color. Once a person enters the system, it takes a comprehensive approach with the support of local communities and organizations to leave the system.
3. Activists, protestors, criminal justice reformers, peacebuilders, healers, and everyday people are on the frontlines of movements to undo injustice and create positive change. Local social justice and peacebuilding groups and survivors provide useful resources for communities, such as mental health support, substance abuse help, bail assistance and more. Solutions must be designed, driven, implemented, and owned by local actors.
4. A growing number of dialogue-based peacebuilding projects have been launching in the U.S. However, attempting to create open dialogue processes within a system of deep structural violence and power imbalance is unlikely to work and may do harm. Currently, the peacebuilding sector in the U.S. is predominantly staffed and led by white people. Asking Black and non-white voices to enter the peacebuilding community’s white-dominant space is not helpful and can further burden and threaten those most impacted by racialized violence in the United States.
5. White supremacy has systematically disadvantaged people of color and directly benefited many white Americans. The trauma Black Americans and people of color have experienced must be recognized as consequences of structural racism. Acknowledging the trauma plays a significant role in coming to terms with the country’s past and conceptualizing better policy to effectively address racism in the country.



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Militarized equipment contributes to police brutality

The 1996 program that transferred military-grade equipment from the U.S. Department of Defense to local law enforcement agencies reinforces the mentality that police are above the law and have the authority to use any means necessary to maintain order. The equipment itself further inflames the structural racism, the forum participants said.

“Militarized policing prevents building peace. In the demonstrations of BLM activists, police have escalated conflict simply by showing up with riot gear and rubber bullets at peaceful protests proving that they are racist because the same response was not given to don’t tread on me activist(s) when they protested the lockdown.”
- Anonymous

Increased militarization by police could be addressed through the repeal of the 1033 Program. However, the structural racism that is perpetuated by other programs in local police departments still needs to be addressed by local peacebuilding, racial justice and community organizations.

The conscious and unconscious biases held by police officers and white Americans toward Black Americans

contribute to the over-policing of predominately BIPoC communities and neighborhoods. Additionally, the excessive use of force against Black Americans and people of color is protected by police unions that justify the militarized equipment and violence used to “protect and serve”.

False claims that Black Americans commit more violence or use and deal drugs more frequently than their white counterparts fuel the justification for over-policing BIPoC neighborhoods. The consultation found that one way to create a “check” on the use of force by police would be to create a community-appointed review board, as was done in New York. However, some participants pointed out that community-appointed review boards can lack the authority to actually put a check on police.

“NYC’s Civilian Complaint Review Board’s missions is to ‘receive, investigate, mediate, hear, make findings, and recommend action on complaints against New York City police officers alleging the use of excessive or unnecessary force, abuse of authority, discourtesy, or the use of offensive language.’ [However,] the efforts of CCRBs and other police accountability efforts are often blunted by police unions.”
- Anonymous

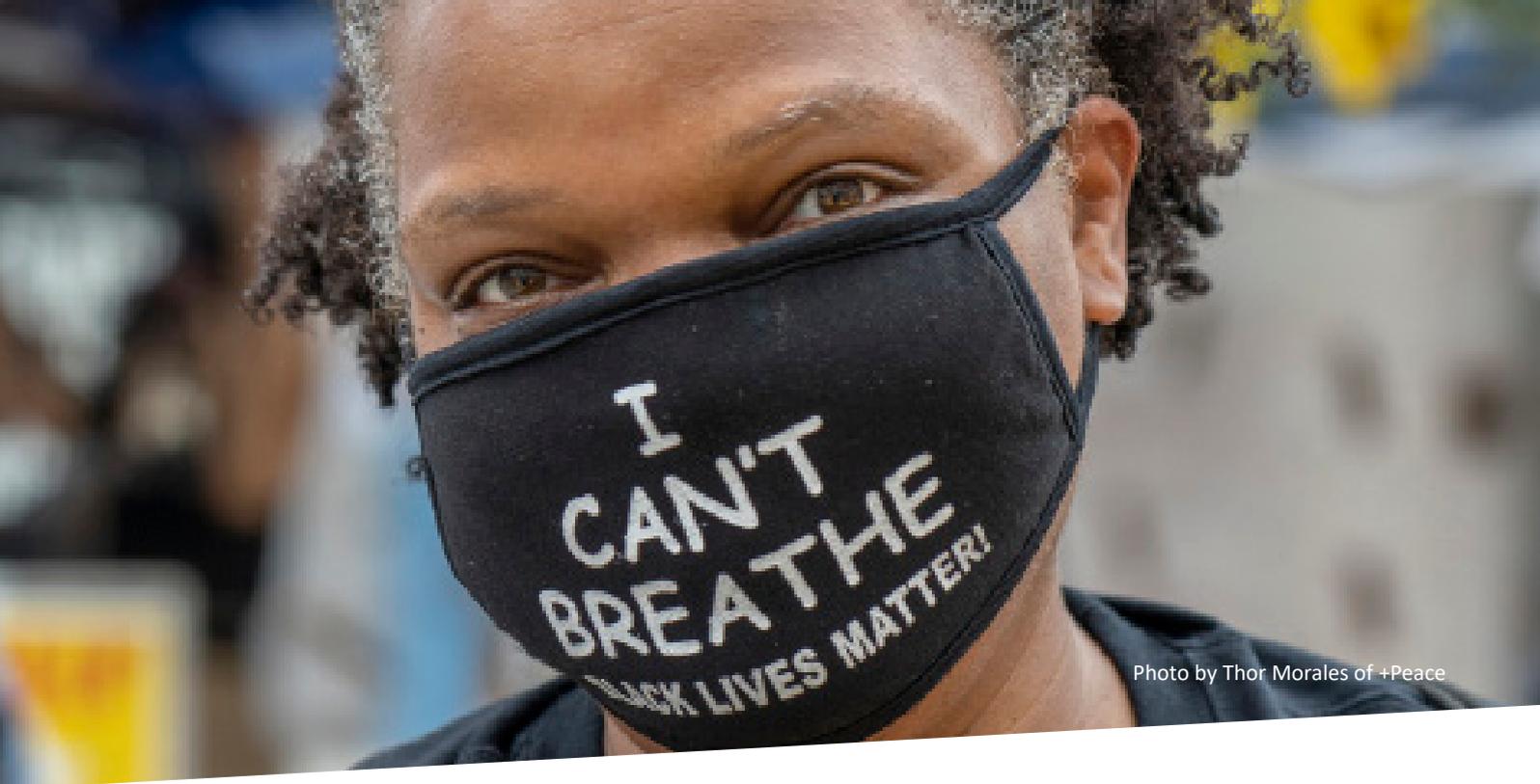


Photo by Thor Morales of +Peace

Address mass incarceration from entry, incarceration and re-entry

For many Black Americans and people of color, the entry point into the mass incarceration cycle is through the school-to-prison pipeline. Through “zero-tolerance” policies and police in schools, students are criminalized for behavior that would be better handled by a guidance counselor. For others, the system of bail reinforces structural racism because Black Americans and people of color are less likely to have the necessary disposable income to afford bail. This ties freedom to the financial ability of a person which upends the presumption of innocence.

“It starts in schools to prison ... and non-white children are told what they can be and where they can go. They are taught solitary, isolation and carceral mentality from day one. Yes, the jail to prison system needs to be scrapped and non-carceral alternatives are needed. Minimum wage for all, housing, health care, education, and real job training and placement will lower much of the survival stresses challenging people. When fed, paid, housed with freedom and hope, all of us will thrive. The politicians will find huge multi-million-dollar savings by keeping people out of jail and out of court.”

- Angie Whitehurst, DC Peace Team’s Board Member and Volunteer

Further, the United States has the highest incarceration rate and imprisoned population in the world. Black Americans and people of color represent an overwhelming majority of the total number of people

incarcerated, despite being a minority of the U.S. population. Once in the system, Black Americans and people of color are more likely to face harsher sentencing than their white counterparts.

Finally, a lack of resources in reintegration programs and support for formerly incarcerated people perpetuates the cycle of incarceration. Many formerly incarcerated people have trouble finding jobs due to their criminal history, have trouble acquiring housing, inability to buy food, lack of mental health or substance abuse services, and reporting to parole officers. This forces many to resort to other means of survival that could result in re-entering mass incarceration with harsher sentencing due to prior convictions.

“I think most people don’t have any idea what [restorative justice] means. And to implement restorative justice practices and programs requires training or retraining of the many people that work in this field and related fields around how do we best restore rather than recriminate. It also means providing investment in housing programs, jobs training programs and programs that help to clear the stigma of trying to function in our society as a former felon.”

- Steve Brigham, Public Engagement Associates

The system of mass incarceration is unique to state-level policies. Each state has their own system in place that addresses incarceration differently. Federal policies can help lay the foundation to address the structural violence of mass incarceration; however,



a more localized approach will better address the differences in policies from state-to-state. Adequately resourcing local organizations to address policies at a local level and provide community members with the support they need to overcome incarceration is a critical step.

Dialogue does not undo oppression

For more than 400 years, Black Americans have been voicing their pain at being excluded from the rights and opportunities of this country. Despite a long history of advocating for equality and respect, Black Americans and other ethnic minorities continue to be targeted by structural violence, and their experiences continue to be minimized and denied by many white Americans. This was reflected in the consultation.

“Throughout the consultation, the language wasn’t very accessible. It was all theory-based, instead of story-based. People feel uncomfortable sharing their stories of racial trauma, but it’s also important that we create a space in which people feel comfortable to do so.”

- Shannon Paige, Peace Direct’s Scoville Peace Fellow

The consultation attempted to create a space for those who are working on the frontlines of racial justice and for people who have been victim to police brutality, mass incarceration and structural racism. The goal was to have a candid conversation. However, it became clear through the consultation that many people were

either fearful of saying something that could be mischaracterized as bad-intentioned, or were there to listen and learn but did not feel ready or able to share their own experience. In many ways, the conversation reflected the white-dominant reality of what we refer to as the peacebuilding community, and the disconnect between this community and communities of color on the frontlines of racial justice work in the United States.

While the conversations were lively and informative, they still seemed to convey a white-dominant space, where Black people and other people of color were expected to be vulnerable and share the trauma and violence their communities have experienced. The international peacebuilding community engaged in the dialogue was primarily white-led, so it did not have the same expectation laid on it. To expect people of color to enter these white-dominant spaces and be vulnerable about their trauma is naïve at best. Those groups who have focused their attention on conflict and violence internationally and are now awakening to the situations in their own countries need to first show up and listen.

The peacebuilding and humanitarian sectors are also beginning to grapple with the need to “decolonize” their own approaches and confront the “white-savior” complex that has shaped their history. This is important self-reflection that needs to be part of the work going forward if stronger relationships of trust and collaboration are to be built, and if systems of injustice and racism are to be undone.



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Glossary

BIPoC - Stands for Black, Indigenous and People of Color

Institutional Racism – The policies and practices within and across institutions that, intentionally or not, produce outcomes that chronically favor or disfavor a racial group

Mass Incarceration – Merriam-Webster defines “incarceration” as confinement in a jail or prison; the act of imprisoning someone or the state of being imprisoned. Whether called mass incarceration, mass imprisonment, the prison boom, the carceral state, or hyper incarceration, this phenomenon refers to the current American experiment in incarceration, which is defined by comparatively and historically extreme rates of imprisonment and by the concentration of imprisonment among young, African American men living in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage.

Militarization of Police – The embrace and implementation of an ideology that stresses the use of force as a way to solve problems. In this definition, militarization occurs along four dimensions: material, cultural, organizational and operational.

Peacebuilding – Understood as a comprehensive concept that encompasses, generates, and sustains the full array of processes, approaches, and stages needed to transform conflict toward more sustainable, peaceful relationships. The term thus involves a wide range of activities that both precede and follow formal peace accords.

Reintegration – The action or process of integrating someone back into society

School-to-Prison Pipeline – The act of funneling children out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems, through various policies like the “zero-tolerance” policy

Structural (or Systemic) Racism – The normalization and legitimization of an array of dynamics – historical, cultural, institutional and interpersonal – that routinely advantage whites while producing cumulative and chronic adverse outcomes for people of color

White Privilege – Refers to white people’s historical and contemporary advantages in access to quality education, decent jobs and livable wages, homeownership, retirement benefits, wealth, etc.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. SUPPORT, AMPLIFY AND STRENGTHEN LOCAL RACIAL JUSTICE INITIATIVES

Many local and national organizations in the U.S. are working on criminal justice reform, bail reform, social justice, racial justice, peacebuilding, etc., to make the country a more peaceful and just place. Their initiatives must be supported and strengthened through donors and international and national networks with other similar organizations to provide lasting help to their communities. Amplifying their work will not only show recognition but create a movement to scale up their impact at a policy and practitioner level.

2. END THE TRANSFER OF MILITARY-GRADE EQUIPMENT TO POLICE

Ending the 1033 Program, which allows for the transfer of military-grade equipment from the U.S. military to local police departments, would help to reduce the possibility of police interactions with the public flaring into violence. It also would go a long way to breaking down the belief that police are above the law.

3. INVEST IN LOCALLY LED EFFORTS TO ADDRESS POLICE BRUTALITY AND THE UNDERLYING STRUCTURAL RACISM

To properly end the mass incarceration of Black Americans and people of color, resources are required to end the school-to-prison pipeline and address bail reform. Incarcerated people and those who are accused of crimes also need fair trials with fair sentencing that is equitable for the crime and not based by race. Formerly incarcerated people need support to reintegrate into society effectively and sustainably. A comprehensive approach across local, state and federal levels is needed to address the mass incarceration system. While a federal policy of legislation like the First Step Act of 2019 supports changes, the policy needs to be implemented at the state and local levels for it to be effective.

4. ADDRESS THE MASS INCARCERATION CYCLE IN ITS ENTIRETY

The U.S. government should make an effort to continue these partnerships with local organizations to build mutual understanding and trust. Local actors are experts and well-positioned in their communities and provide a valuable resource to the U.S. government which should not be underestimated or disregarded. Building trust is a long-term process and the U.S. government should be consistent in its efforts to foster positive partnerships through engagement and inclusion.

5. RECOGNIZE AND SUPPORT HEALING OF THE TRAUMA EXPERIENCED AND FELT BY BLACK AMERICANS, INDIGENOUS GROUPS AND PEOPLE OF COLOR

The experience of Black Americans, indigenous groups and people of color has long been minimized. For any sort of race reconciliation and personal healing to take place, the violence and trauma must be recognized. Governments from a local to national level must admit the generations of policies that have contributed to the structural violence experienced by Black Americans. Without recognition and support for healing, the pain and violence experienced by Black Americans, indigenous groups, and people of color will be ignored and not properly addressed for a more equitable society.

6. AFFIRM AND SUPPORT BIPOC-LED NONVIOLENT STRUGGLES FOR RACIAL JUSTICE AS A CRITICAL PART OF PEACEBUILDING IN THE UNITED STATES

Peacebuilding organizations must recognize the racial and social justice movements and criminal justice reform initiatives among many other BIPOC-led nonviolent struggles already underway. Peacebuilding is not separate from the movements already underway and led by BIPOC. Peacebuilding are the movements led by BIPOC as well.

7. STRENGTHEN RELATIONSHIPS, TRUST AND NETWORKING BETWEEN THE PEACEBUILDING, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND RACIAL JUSTICE COMMUNITIES TO LESSEN THE BURDEN ON BIPOC FOR SOCIAL AND RACIAL JUSTICE EFFORTS

The peacebuilding community needs to better recognize and join alongside BIPOC to amplify their voices. The Black Lives Matter movement is too often left for Black Americans and people of color to shoulder the burden. Non-BIPOC organizations often prioritize other issues around the nation and overlook the impacts of structural racism and violence on Black Americans and people of color. Non-BIPOC should go the extra mile to connect with BIPOC organizations and offer support based on the community's needs and preferences, demonstrating a commitment to locally led peacebuilding and long-term relationship-building.



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