



## THE METRO-ATLANTA ASSOCIATION OF BLACK PSYCHOLOGISTS



### Response to Ongoing Tragedy in Ferguson, Missouri

The history and legacy of racism and institutionalized oppression in the United States of America evokes serious questions regarding racial profiling, discrimination, and the genocide of people who share an ancestry that is African in origin. The murders of Michael Brown and Kajieme Powell coupled with the attempted murder of Howard University graduate Mya Aaten-White are symptomatic of an institutional pathology entrenched in American society. The names of our children, fathers, mothers, sisters, and brothers who have been harmed by state sponsored violence are too numerous to recount here, but we hold their lives in sacred reverence even when their country attempts to deny their humanity. Over the past two weeks, we have seen that the death of another unarmed teenager has again ripped open a wound across this nation. The flames continue to be fanned by the shooting of two additional young people. We send our heartfelt condolences to the families of these youth and to the citizens of Ferguson, Missouri.

#### Media Mis-handling of this Tragedy

The manner in which Michael Brown's killing is being handled in the media and the nation as a whole is indicative of the systematic racism that African Americans experience on a daily basis. The impact of stereotyping leading to racial profiling by police officers is well documented. Drs. Phillip Atiba [Goff](#), Lori [Guevara](#), Jennifer [Eberhardt](#), Joshua [Correll](#), and others utilize scientific methodologies to demonstrate implicit bias with regard to police behavior, perceptions of guilt, and sentencing. In fact, Sylvia Wynter's work in the 1990's outlined a history of police officers describing interactions with African American males as occurring with N.H.I (no humans involved).

Despite scientific evidence regarding entrenched police bias, large scale media outlets fail to disseminate this information and instead rely on attributional errors in their criminalization of Michael Brown and those who are protesting the lack of accountability and transparency for his killing. In the aftermath of this tragedy, we have witnessed the utilization of stereotypes that criminalize African American males as a means for justifying institutional systems of inequity and overt police brutality. [Researchers](#) have shown that this behavior dehumanizes the victim, builds group cohesion among those sanctioning police violence, and enables people to justify the lack of accountability for the killing of an unarmed child. Naturally, this leads one to ask whether Michael Brown would still be living had he been a white male. There is enough scientific evidence to support the conclusion that [ethnicity is always a factor in interactions with law enforcement](#).

#### Evidence Noting Increased Police Violence towards African American Boys

[Dr. Phillip Atiba Goff](#) noted in his research that African American boys are often viewed as older than their chronological age. [Correll](#) and his colleagues note that police are more likely to

view African American males as dangerous and holding weapons despite being unarmed. These perceptions based on racial bias lead to unbalanced beliefs regarding guilt and increased police violence towards young boys. The fact that we have science to support the concrete existence of racial profiling and discrimination yet do little to hold police departments and communities accountable for this ongoing violence suggests a larger and more systematic pathology.

The events occurring in Ferguson, Missouri are a direct result of discrimination and systemic violence enacted by a police department not engaging in law enforcement, but rather the murder and intimidation of a historically oppressed people. Police departments across this nation must institute immediate screening processes to ensure that people who possess underlying racial biases and psychopathology are not hired and that those already employed are prosecuted if they harm anyone. Further, Dr. Melva Robinson notes that [community policing](#) should be instituted to ensure that officers live-in and are accountable to the areas they serve. The current structure of the [Ferguson Police Department](#) (95% white) and community (67% black) suggests that state sponsored occupation is occurring, which leads to systemic abuses of power and significant threats to the overall community wellbeing.

### **Threats to Community Wellbeing**

As healers, it is incumbent that we speak truth to power. We are committed to the healing of our community as we have suffered tremendously from systemic violence due to enslavement, Jim Crow, and resistance towards our equity. This continued assault has substantial ramifications for the wellbeing of our community. Dr. Shawn [Utsey](#) has researched the impact of stress resulting from ongoing experiences with racism that African Americans encounter. His work suggests that living under the constant threat of racism leads to chronic health conditions such as heart disease, hypertension, and cancer. Further, for the families of those shot, protestors experiencing violence at the hands of the police, and viewers of this tragedy, chronic mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, Acute Stress Disorder, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are likely to develop for a portion of the population.

### **Assessment of Child Murders and their Supporters**

As psychologists of African ancestry, we are dedicated to the physical, psychological, and spiritual well-being of our people. We are not dispassionate behavioral scientists who are removed from the community. When people of African ancestry are killed without recourse in America, we define it as state sponsored terrorism, as these are our sons, daughters, fathers and mothers. When we state that people who kill children without remorse possess anti-social personality characteristics, we do not make such an assessment indiscriminately. Individuals who seek to justify the actions of the police by dehumanizing our youth are demonstrating clinically significant psychopathology.

### **Recommendations for Change**

If the United States is truly committed to being a democracy, it must address the long standing investment in institutionalized racism that still justifies the murder of children due to the color of their skin. People of African ancestry in Ferguson and across the nation are suffering greatly from the murders of two young people and the attempt to end the life of another. Immediate

action is needed by the leadership of this nation and the state of Missouri to prevent further psychological distress among all those experiencing this tragedy.

We expect the Obama Administration, the Nixon Administration of Missouri, and the United States Justice Department to ensure the prosecution of those responsible for murdering Michael Brown and Kajieme Powell and for the attempted murder of Mya Aaten-White. We call upon the Obama Administration and the Federal government to address the legacy of state supported oppression through the allocation of funds to address the mental health crisis resulting from the continued assault against our youth. We call upon African Americans to continuously speak truth to power by pointing out acts of racism and discrimination against our people. We have been the social conscience and transformative agents of change in this nation. Thus, as citizens we expect to be treated equitably and with respect. All of us should continue to speak intelligently, valiantly, and courageously against injustice that happens to our people. Finally, as healers, we reaffirm our commitment to serving our people and continue to struggle for justice and ultimately, our humanity.

**About the Metro Atlanta Association of Black Psychologists (MAABPsi):**

The Association of Black Psychologists (ABPsi) was founded 1968, by over 200 psychologists concerned about the psychological impact of racial injustices perpetuated against the African American community. The Metro-Atlanta chapter was formed in 1978 (MAABPsi). The organization strives to impact the mental health of the local community by providing programs, services, training, and advocacy. To learn more about the Metro Atlanta Association of Black Psychologists, please contact the chapter at [info@ maabpsi.org](mailto:info@maabpsi.org) , 404.913.3144, or visit [www.maabpsi.org](http://www.maabpsi.org). To learn more about the initiatives of the national organization, visit [www.abpsi.org](http://www.abpsi.org) or call 301-449-3082.

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