

Tyre Nichols' killing by police: Why is this still happening?

January 30 2023, by Ivan Natividad



UC Berkeley professor Nikki Jones has focused her research around the impact of violence, policing, and the criminal legal system on Black people in urban settings. Credit: Nikki Jones

Video footage was released today of the interaction between Memphis police officers and Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man who died just days after being beaten by police during a Jan. 7 traffic stop.

The five [police officers](#) involved in the incident, all of whom were Black, have since been fired and given charges including second-degree murder. The death is one of many high-profile [police](#) killings, most notably George Floyd's murder in May 2020, that have sparked public outrage about [police violence](#) and brutality in Black communities.

The death of Nichols, though, shows that policy reforms in response to previous police killings have not gone far enough, says UC Berkeley African American Studies Professor Nikki Jones, and that the use of targeted police units in Black neighborhoods, seen as high-crime areas, escalates the possibility for [extreme violence](#).

The Nichols case also dismisses the notion that generations of violent systemic racism built into America's criminal justice system can be changed by simply hiring more Black law enforcement officers.

"The institution of policing is one that has a deep history in racial control. And you don't get away from that. You're not absolved of that just because you are a Black officer," says Jones, an award-winning criminologist, who recently published a paper in the *City & Community* journal focused on the impact of targeted policing units in Black neighborhoods. "So, this case dispels these quick fixes that people think are real solutions."

Berkeley News spoke with Jones about the impact that videos of police killings have had on her students and how police training and culture still help to justify brutal forms of violence in Black communities.

Berkeley News: The officers involved in this incident

were charged with murder much faster than police have been in past police killings. Why do you think this is the case?

Nikki Jones: I think that doesn't happen prior to the summer of 2020 when George Floyd was murdered. And yet it is also the case that these officers are all Black, and we've seen in other places where Black officers have been held accountable in ways that white officers haven't.

And it also causes us to question what people think of as a simple solution to the problem. Right at the heart of the uprisings of summer 2020, people saw Black officers as a response to the brutality of policing. And I think what we see here, again, based on what people have said about the [video](#), is that to become a [police officer](#) is to become an expert in distributing force, aggression and violence. That is what policing trains you to do, and it allows the opportunity to use that violence in unwarranted and unrestrained ways.

So it is a systemic issue that can't just be solved with a quick fix.

In previous incidents of police killing Black people, we have often seen non-Black officers as the perpetrators. But in this case, as you point out, the police were all Black. Should this case be viewed differently because of that? How can we understand the impact of systemic racism in America's criminal justice system differently, or the same?

I think that because they are Black officers, it highlights and exposes some of the basic contradictions and flaws in what we think policing is as an institution.

Policing is an institution that trains officers to have a mind-state of "us versus them," and Black officers and women officers are as susceptible to that as anyone else.

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This case dispels these quick fixes that people think are real solutions, that simply having Black officers can solve this deeper issue.

After all the supposed reforms police departments made following the murder of George Floyd and other Black victims, why is this still happening?

The unit involved in this murder was a special task force unit that used targeted policing practices. They were a task force specifically called the SCORPION Unit. So that, right away, reflects their relationship to the community and its work.

Scorpions bite and kill.

When you have these hotspot targeted policing practices, and you give officers license, in some cases, to hunt down crime or violence in these places, you legitimize a certain type of logic that officers will have when going about their work—that people who live in these places are the kinds of people that you have to treat more aggressively. The officers orient themselves to these places and people with the expectation of danger and aggression.

And so why do we still have that now, after the murder of George Floyd?

Well, we had this real moment where we had a rupture and an opportunity for transformation. And certainly, I do think some changes have come from that. But we also saw we had a large-scale retrenchment in response to spikes in gun violence.

So, we are in a moment in history when policing has never been under more scrutiny. So how does this still happen? It only happens if on-the-ground police believe that this kind of activity and behavior is condoned.

You haven't viewed the video of Nichols being beaten by police yet. It is said to be very graphic. Can you talk about how videos like this can be traumatic to view? What is a healthy way to take them in?

I just had a conversation with my students yesterday about the impact of these videos of police killings—this generation, in particular, as other scholars have called them, "the Trayvon Generation."

They have grown up with images of police violence in their back pockets over the course of their entire lives, right from the moment that they have engaged with social media. So they are growing up with pocket-sized coffins in their backpacks.

Now, certainly, videos of extraordinary violence have been used to motivate movements. And we think about photography, as well, that holds that potential.

So as a researcher, one of the ways that I share with students to engage with these videos is to think about them analytically, and to intentionally align myself with the target of police violence. Aligning on the side of George Floyd or Tyre Nichols, if I were to watch this video.

That's how I would enter. And oftentimes people can watch these videos by critically looking for some justification to legitimize the violence. Looking at it solely from the perspective of the police.

One of the things that I encourage people to do, through my work and my teaching and writing, is to look at the world from the perspective of the person who's being targeted by the police. And the people who are frequent targets of police aggression, police surveillance and police [violence](#).

So if I were to look at the video, it would be through that lens and perspective.

More information: Nikki Jones et al, "Other than the Projects, You Stay Professional": "Colorblind" Cops and the Enactment of Spatial Racism in Routine Policing, *City & Community* (2022). [DOI: 10.1177/15356841221123820](#)

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

Citation: Tyre Nichols' killing by police: Why is this still happening? (2023, January 30) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-01-tyre-nichols-police.html>

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