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# Police Killings, Political Impunity, Racism and the People's Health: Issues for Our Times

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“**B**lack lives matter.” “I can’t breathe.” “Racism kills.” These searing statements visibly appear on handwritten placards, on buttons, and on the shirts, hoodies, hats, and even bodies of hundreds of thousands of people who have been participating in protests across the United States, triggered by the recent round of police killings of unarmed black men and, in the case of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, the abject failures of grand juries to call for criminal prosecution for their deaths.<sup>1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7</sup> Starkly revealing the profound links between racism and the people’s health, these statements also illuminate the flip side of this pain: the fundamental links between social justice and public health.<sup>8, 9</sup>

My impression, derived from being at and participating in these public expressions of anger and outrage—and also at last week’s “listening event” here at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health—is that they are also and equally about dignity, about affirming human rights and well-being, and about what each and all of us must do to create a world in which all can truly thrive. It is heartening to see so many young people stepping up, so many elders holding fast, the protesters so inclusive with regard to race/ethnicity, nativity, Indigenous status, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability status.<sup>10</sup> It is encouraging to see the outrage cut through the cant that we live in a “post-racial” society,<sup>11</sup> and to move beyond polite euphemisms about “diversity” and “cultural competency” to press instead for accountability and frank discussion about the complex realities, past and present, of racial injustice.<sup>12, 13, 14</sup> At a time of growing economic inequality within

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and across racial/ethnic groups,<sup>15,16</sup> the rise of an allied social movement seeking racial justice gives grounds for hope. It movingly affirms the progressive premise of public health and its focus on preventing harm, especially unjust harm – as it also vividly repudiates centuries of racism, including scientific racism, that are also part of our legacy in public health and society overall.<sup>17</sup>

We in public health have the capacity—the analytic tools, the data, and the knowledge—to make the connections palpable – and actionable—between the many forms of racism, whether structural, everyday, gendered, or environmental, and the myriad ways they become embodied and manifest as health inequities.<sup>18,19,20</sup> We likewise have the capacity to analyze—and promote—the social determination of health equity and illuminate how and why the intertwined work for social justice, racial justice, economic justice, environmental justice, community justice, and climate justice, is integral to our public health mission. We can and must carry out these dual lines of rigorous work in our research, our practice, and our pedagogy.

Police killings, impunity, and health inequities are not new – and neither is the struggle against them. Their newfound visibility, however, brought about by a swelling social movement, creates a critical moment in which to press for constructive change. The time for action is now: in our field, in our work, and here at school as well.

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