

The UN Addresses Systemic Anti-Black Racism and Police Brutality

After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, mass protests led to discussions on how to tackle anti-Black police brutality worldwide. How are the UN addressing the topic? A recent report provides insights.

After the murder of George Floyd in the US in May 2020, Burkina Faso, on behalf of the [African Group](#), asked the Human Rights Council to [hold an urgent debate](#) on anti-Black “human rights violations, systemic racism, police brutality, and violence against peaceful protests”. The debate, which was held in June 2020, highlighted that Afro-descendants continue to face structural racism and that racial discrimination against Black citizens of the US must be eliminated. The Trump administration, alongside several of its international allies, lobbied against an investigation that singled out the US, claiming that such an investigation into a country that, according to [Lana Marks](#), the US ambassador in South Africa, “[takes] action in response to human rights issues” would be unfair. Others made the case that to defeat racism, the council must [not single out one country](#), as racism is a widespread problem on an international scale. It was therefore decided that a report should be prepared that investigated systemic racism, police brutality, and the human rights violations of people of African descent on a broader, international basis.

The [report](#), which was released in June 2021, states the importance of centring the “[voices](#) of people of African descent who are victims of human rights violations and their families” and emphasises that the concerns of people of African descent must be acted upon. Further objectives of the agenda put forward are to “reverse cultures of denial, dismantle systemic racism and accelerate the pace of action”. Finally, it states that it is vital to “acknowledge and confront legacies, including through accountability and redress”.

Creating Accountability: Beginning with the Data

To begin to address systemic racism, comprehensive data that is disaggregated by race or ethnic origin as well as other factors which will allow for an intersectional perspective must be collected in accordance with international human rights law and made publicly available. Currently, figures that exist on deaths caused by the police and on how laws, policies, and practices affect certain racial or ethnic groups tend to be collected by regional bodies, civil society organizations, media outlets, universities, and think tanks. This is because many

governments and law enforcement agencies do not collect or publish data on these matters, and therefore other bodies fill this gap in data collection and research. The UN report also points out that when data on these matters is collected by the state, it is often not used to inform effective policymaking. This lack of data collection from state and law enforcement sources contributes to a lack of accountability.

The [statistics](#) outlined in the report that are currently available regarding police brutality and human rights offences against Black people show a clear picture of worldwide systemic racism. In 2019, African-Americans made up only 13% of the US population yet accounted for 26% of all arrests. In the UK, between April 2019 and March 2020, for every 1,000 White people only six stop and searches were made, compared to 54 for every 1,000 Black people. A 2016 survey by the Defender of Rights also shows that in France, “young men perceived as Arab/from the Maghreb or Black were 20 times more likely to be subjected to identity checks than others and reported facing significantly more insulting behaviour and physical abuse during police stops”.

As well as outlining existing statistics, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights gathered primary data that revealed that at least 98% of 190 incidents caused by law enforcement officials that resulted in the death of Africans and people of African descent took place in Europe, Latin America, and North America. However, serious human rights abuses against African migrants were also noted in other parts of the world, such as Libya. Nonetheless, with 98% being such an extraordinarily high figure, clearly the regions of Europe, Latin America, and North America warrant a greater focus in this matter.

The Importance of Anti-Racist Discourse Embedded in Education

According to the report, systemic racism persists largely due to misconceptions that “racially discriminatory structures” no longer exist since the abolition of slavery and the end of colonialism. It is instead believed that the measures states have taken to create equality in societies have achieved their goal. To tackle systemic racism, states, particularly those with a history of slave trade and colonialism, must work to embed discourses in all forms of education they offer that move away from current discourses that deny racism, deny their colonial legacies, and deny the racial injustices, inequalities and human rights violations that Black people continue to experience today. However, with many of those currently in power continuing themselves to peddle racist misconceptions, including that racial equality has been

achieved and that Black people, including migrants, are more likely to be involved in criminal activities, it is unclear how much impact the OHCHR's report is likely to have.

The UN Assembles a Panel to Probe Anti-Black Racism in Policing

Following the report, the [UN assembled a panel of three experts](#) in law enforcement and human rights to investigate systemic racism in policing against people of African descent. They will have 3 years to investigate. This investigation will include analyses of the legacies of slavery and colonialism and will involve making recommendations for change. As the murder of George Floyd in the US is central to the discussion on systemic racism and police brutality, although the panel will investigate law enforcement across the globe, it will focus much of its work on the US. Alongside this, the broader context of the investigation ensures that systemic racism and police brutality continues to be understood as a global issue.

The UN's report and the panel that has been assembled may be a small step in a long battle against anti-Black racism in policing, a battle that goes back decades. However, many remain hopeful that by working together with grassroots movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, and families of those killed by law enforcement officers, it is a step in the right direction.

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