

The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing

Listening Session 1.31.15 – Testimony of DeRay Mckesson

Thank you for the opportunity to speak today at the Listening Session on Technology and Social Media. And thank you to Co-Chairs Commissioner Ramsey and Professor Robinson, and to the rest of the panel. I must also note that I am proud to see a fellow protestor, Ms. Brittany Packnett, on this panel as her membership highlights an intent to include the voices of those who have brought the issue of police brutality and misconduct to the nation's attention.

I am a protestor. I began protesting in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014 and to continue to this day. Tweets and Instagram videos were my call-to-action – I was able to bear witness, initially from afar and subsequently on W. Florissant and Canfield Drive, to the aggressive militarization of police on American soil. I, like many others, have been tear gassed repeatedly, have had “non-lethal” weapons pointed at me by officers, have been told that it was illegal to stand still on an American street, and have been pepper sprayed – all for engaging in peaceful protest.

In no uncertain terms, Twitter saved our lives. If it were not for the tweets and vines, it is likely that officials in Missouri would have convinced you, and the world, that we did not exist. Social media allowed us to tell the story of police brutality that we were living and the untruths that we were repeatedly being told by City and State officials as we searched for truth in real-time.

Protest is purposeful confrontation. Protest is purposeful disruption. The protests continue because we have seen, with our own eyes, that police brutality is not a coincidental aspect of American life, but that it is deeply woven into the fabric of American policing and that it falls heavily along the lines of race. We repeatedly see that that unarmed black women, men and children are being killed by the police and that they are not being held accountable for such action.

So, today, I am here to suggest a role that you can play. I am here to advocate for changes related to social media and technology that you, in your role on this Task Force, can recommend to affirm that black lives do, indeed, matter and that honor the memories of the many fallen: Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, VonDerrit Myers, Rekia Boyd, Renisha McBride, Ezell Ford, Dontre Hamilton and many others.

First, it is necessary that you draft and introduce national guidance to be distributed to all police departments and municipalities receiving federal funding that clearly states that citizens have the right to film the police. We know that filming the police will not lead to justice immediately – as the death of Eric Garner so tragically highlights – but we also believe that the presence of video footage documenting cases of police brutality allows conversations about police brutality to take place, a necessary step for creating change. As a consequence, we believe every police officer in America should be required to have dashboard cameras and wear body cameras that are set to record during their entire shift, with clear consequences for non-compliance.

Secondly, there must be repercussions for officers who refuse to show their badges. The police, especially in St. Louis, have continuously shown a disregard for the law, despite the Department of Justice noting that officers are to have visible nameplates. After 176 days, there are still times where many officers do not have nameplates. And there is no consequence. This is another, subtle, provocation on behalf of the police that suggests that they are above the law. And in America, no one is supposed to be above the law.

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Third, it is necessary for the Department of Justice, in conjunction with community organizations and local law enforcement, to develop virtual and in-person training modules whose use is mandatory by all police departments receiving federal funding that focuses on implicit bias, both recognizing bias and accounting for bias, and that has specific sections that address shooter bias in decisions related to non-white persons of interest. Ultimately, we believe that police officers who, despite their best efforts, show significant shooter bias in these trainings should not be deployed to black and brown communities.

Fourth, it is necessary for this Task Force to recommend the inclusion of a question that explicitly asks youth whether the police in their community make them feel safe, or a question akin to this, on the National Youth Risk Behavior Survey that is distributed to most high school and many middle school students each year. This would be an important first-step in collecting national data that can be segmented by race, gender, and a host of other demographic indicators about the perceptions of American policing by youth. Currently, we still do not know which police departments make youth feel safe and which do not. Collecting this data is essential to identifying the policies and practices that can improve police relations with the youth they are responsible for protecting and serving.

And fifth, the tools that we have to communicate with each other, in 2015, are unprecedented and, importantly, rely on the internet. Twitter and other social media tools were pivotal to the protest community in highlighting the American Horror Story that is police brutality in black communities. To this end, it is important that this Task Force firmly make recommendations that affirm net neutrality. This may seem to be an odd request, but our ability to communicate with each other can be willfully stifled by companies and organizations that do not have an interest in social justice or that actively work against issues facing black America and communities of color in general. The current freedom of the internet allows us to use this public good for the common good.

Ending police brutality will take innovative solutions. Black people have been systemically oppressed for centuries and the response to this oppression by the system itself has either been willful ignorance or piecemeal programs. Now, we have an opportunity to engage in deep systemic change. The recommendations laid forth above represent clear steps in the direction of the change we seek for ourselves and future generations.

Today is the 176th day of protest. We protest not to affirm the worth of our lives, but to expose the depth of the evil that we face. I am but one of many protestors who are committed to confronting and disrupting until there is systemic change. And I am hopeful that you will use your platform to assist in bringing about much needed change that recognizes the evil that we have faced, and continue to face, in blackness.

Thank you.