

Criminal

Floyd shines light on systemic injustice against racialized, Indigenous people | Angelique EagleWoman

By Angelique EagleWoman



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(June 4, 2020, 9:05 AM EDT) -- The United States is engulfed in protests because yet another police officer, aided by other officers, has used unlawful lethal force to kill a black man. This time it happened in Minneapolis, but unfortunately it is all too common in North America for black men to be killed by law enforcement. Black lives matter. In the Western Hemisphere, the Atlantic slave trade started as European colonizers decimated the populations of native peoples. White plantation owners in the aftermath of genocidal policies against native peoples replaced the enslavement of native peoples with the enslavement of people kidnapped from Africa. On stolen native lands, black lives were not honoured or protected.

The lack of humanity continues today as the video watched around the world documented the senseless killing of George Floyd who did not resist arrest and whose very breath was hard-pressed out of him. In Canada, the brutality against racialized individuals needs to be addressed with appropriate prosecution of law enforcement officers using lethal force as well. For example, teenager Dafonte Miller was beaten and lost an eye due to the alleged aggravated assault of two off-duty police officers, who are also brothers, with the verdict still pending from the conduct occurring in 2016. Indigenous peoples have also borne the brunt of this brutality when simply living their daily lives or when protesting the desecration of their rightful lands by the law enforcement representing the governments, federal and provincial, responsible for allowing or promoting that exploitation.

Another video that recently surfaced was of a woman named Amy Cooper threatening an unarmed, non-threatening black man, Harvard educated bird watcher, that she would call the police and report her life was in danger. He had calmly asked her to leash her dog in Central Park. She carried through on her threat using her white privilege and belief that she would be believed over the man she threatened. Because he recorded the interaction, the truth is apparent for all to see. It is being reported that Cooper is Canadian from Toronto and currently living in New York City. Systemic injustice and racism are the reality in Canada, this is not just an issue in the United States, but in many other countries as well.

Tying into police brutality is the interaction of police with racialized and Indigenous peoples in the first instance through over-criminalization. In my 2019 article on "Envisioning Indigenous Community Courts to Realize Justice in Canada for First Nations", the over-criminalization of Indigenous peoples was related through the 2014-15 and 2015-16 reports by Statistics Canada.

"According to correctional statistics for 2014-15, Aboriginal peoples comprising only three per cent of the Canadian population accounted for 25 per cent of provincial and territorial custody admissions and 22 per cent of federal correctional admissions. Female Aboriginal adults showed the greatest overrepresentation as 38 per cent of the provincial and territorial correctional admissions and 31 per cent in federal custodial admissions. Aboriginal youth were overrepresented as well with 33 per cent of custodial admissions from nine jurisdictions where the Aboriginal youth population comprised seven per cent of the total youth population. In comparison to the 42 per cent of non-Indigenous youth who were admitted to custody, 52 per cent of Aboriginal youth were admitted to the corrections system with a higher proportion of female Aboriginal youth at 44 per cent.

In 2015-16, statistics for the provincial and territorial custody admissions for Aboriginal adults was 26 per cent and for federal correctional admissions was 28 per cent, representing a six per cent increase for admission to federal custody from the previous year. For Aboriginal females the overrepresentation numbers were the same as the prior year with 38 per cent in provincial and territorial custodial admissions and 31 per cent in the federal system. For Aboriginal youth, the numbers increased in 2015-2016 to 35 per cent for those admitted to correctional facilities out of a population of seven per cent of total youth. Likewise compared to the 44 per cent of non-Aboriginal youth admitted to custody, 54 per cent of Aboriginal youth were admitted to correctional services with the overrepresentation of female Aboriginal youth at 43 per cent. These are alarming statistics regarding the criminalization of Aboriginal peoples and depict systemic racism in the Canadian judicial system."

To put these numbers into practical reality, here are situations where Indigenous peoples have been disregarded or dehumanized by law enforcement in Canada reported on by media. Opening a bank account and being arrested — in Vancouver an Indigenous grandfather and granddaughter were put in handcuffs at the Bank of

Montreal on Dec. 20, 2019; Indigenous people frequently report (and I have experienced this as well when shopping in Thunder Bay) being followed in Canadian stores when they shop and drive — see the report, “Under Suspicion,” on racial profiling by the Ontario Human Rights Commission issued in 2017; for missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls the experience of being dealt with disrespectfully when family members report missing relatives to the police — see 2013 report, “Those Who Take Us Away: Abusive Policing and Failures in Protection of Indigenous Women and Girls in British Columbia, Canada”; and so many other instances of dehumanization of Indigenous peoples by government and the police forces that failed to protect and serve.

There are countless interactions that never make it to the media, are not recorded on a video and leave the victims of racial profiling abandoned and alone. And then when charges are actually filed often the justice system fails racialized and Indigenous people again. Just remember how 22-year-old Cree man, Colten Boushie was shot at point-blank range in Saskatchewan and the perpetrator acquitted in 2018.

This is part one of a two-part series.

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