In cities across America, local law enforcement units too often treat low-income neighborhoods populated by African Americans and Latinos as if they were combat zones, instead of communities where people strive to live, learn, work, play and pray in peace and harmony. Youth of color, black boys and men especially, who should be growing up in supportive, affirming environments are instead presumed to be criminals and relentlessly subjected to aggressive police tactics that result in unnecessary fear, arrests, injuries, and deaths.

Michael Brown, an unarmed African American teen shot multiple times and killed by a Ferguson, MO police officer, is not the only young boy killed in a list of similar circumstances. Investigations into the Ferguson shooting are ongoing, and many of the specific facts remain unclear; the pattern is too frequent to be a mistake. From policing to adjudication and incarceration, it is time for the country to counter the effects of systemic racial bias, which impacts the perceptions, judgment, and behavior of too many of our law enforcement personnel.

Our police departments have professional and public accountability structures in place to ensure that the police act in the best and most ethical manner. Problems arise when these accountability structures are not thoroughly implemented. Accountability is the cornerstone of effective policing. In the absence of accountability, the history of our communities has been one of public mistrust, police violence, and unequal treatment of people of color.

MEGAN HARRIS McCLOSKEY is a director at PolicyLink and a research associate at the Urban Institute. She recently published “Killing the Black Man: Police Violence and the Criminalization of Black Masculinity” (2015) and is a co-author of “Beyond Blaming the Victim: Understanding and Reforming Police-Community Relations” (2014).

DEAR PRESIDENT OBAMA:

In their communications, President Obama's administration and the White House have repeatedly acknowledged the tragic deaths of young African American and Latino males at the hands of local police. After the killing of Trayvon Martin in Florida in 2012, the President released a statement where he said, “We need a system that treats all Americans with the same respect and dignity.” This was followed by the President's call to the Department of Justice to conduct an investigation into the practices of the Ferguson, MO police department.


Michael Brown, an Unarmed African American Teen Shot Multiple Times and Killed by a Ferguson, MO Police Officer, Is Not the Only Young Boy Killed in a List of Similar Circumstances. Investigations into the Ferguson Shooting Are Ongoing, and Many of the Specific Facts Remain Unclear; the Pattern Is Too Frequent to Be a Mistake. From Policing to Adjudication and Incarceration, It Is Time for the Country to Counter the Effects of Systemic Racial Bias, Which Impacts the Perceptions, Judgment, and Behavior of Too Many of Our Law Enforcement Personnel. Our Police Departments Have Professional and Public Accountability Structures in Place to Ensure That the Police Act in the Best and Most Ethical Manner. Problems Arise When These Accountability Structures Are Not Thoroughly Implemented. Accountability Is the Cornerstone of Effective Policing. In the Absence of Accountability, the History of Our Communities Has Been One of Public Mistrust, Police Violence, and Unequal Treatment of People of Color.

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