

UNDERSTANDING THE
BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

THE RISE OF THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT

by Samantha S. Bell

A close-up photograph of a hand holding a black sign with the words "BLACK LIVES MATTER" written in white, thick, hand-painted letters. The sign is held against a background of a blue and purple geometric pattern. The hand is dark-skinned and is gripping the bottom edge of the sign. The sign is slightly tilted and has a white border. The background features a large purple arc and a blue area with a white grid pattern.

BLACK
LIVES
MATTER

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AT A GLANCE

- The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement started on social media. It began with a Facebook post and a hashtag.
- The movement began in 2013 after George Zimmerman was acquitted in the killing of Black teen Trayvon Martin.
- The movement grew in 2014 after a police officer killed eighteen-year-old Michael Brown.
- Protests grew as more unarmed Black individuals were killed by police. Protesters used slogans such as “No justice, no peace” and “I can’t breathe.”
- In May 2020, a Black man named George Floyd died after a Minneapolis police officer knelt on his neck for around eight minutes. Bystanders took video of the incident and posted it on the internet.

HOW DID BLACK LIVES MATTER BEGIN?

During the next year, many incidents occurred between white police officers and Black citizens. One of them even involved a child younger than Trayvon Martin. People felt strongly that something had to change. The continuing incidents helped spur the early growth of BLM.



The Eric Garner case was a major event in the early days of the BLM movement.

DEADLY CONFRONTATIONS

On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner was in New York City. He was going to dinner with a friend. A fight broke out nearby, and Garner helped break it up. Police officers arrived and accused him of selling untaxed

cigarettes. When they tried to arrest him, Garner argued with them. Officer Daniel Pantaleo put him in a **choke hold**. Other officers dragged Garner to the ground. Garner had health problems. He said he couldn't breathe. He died soon after.

"I CAN'T BREATHE"

Eric Garner's last words became a rallying cry among protesters. In 2016, his siblings used those words to write the song "I Can't Breathe." The lyrics of the song reflect problems between police officers and the black community. Garner's sister, Elisha Flagg, sang on the track. His family said the song was "dedicated to the struggle everyone is going through."

Quoted in Daniel Kreps, "Eric Garner's Family Drops Moving New Song 'I Can't Breathe,'" Rolling Stone, July 11, 2016. www.rollingstone.com.

On August 9, 2014, eighteen-year-old Michael Brown and his friend walked down the middle of the street in Ferguson, Missouri. Officer Darren Wilson saw them. He told them to move onto the sidewalk. Brown and his friend refused. Wilson stopped his car in front of them.

What happened next is still unclear. Wilson said Brown came up to the window of his police car. He said Brown punched him and grabbed for Wilson's gun. Then Brown ran away, turned back, and acted like he was going to attack. Some witnesses backed up Wilson's story.

Other people said Brown raised his hands in surrender. Some thought they heard Brown say, “Don’t shoot.” During the confrontation, Wilson shot Brown six times. Brown died on the street.

Tensions between black communities and largely white police forces were already

MAPPING POLICE VIOLENCE

After Brown’s death, data scientist Samuel Sinyangwe helped create the website Mapping Police Violence. The website gathers information from various sources, such as social media, police reports, and obituaries. The site uses the information to produce data about police killings across the country. Sinyangwe explained that this website was meant to show Americans there was a national crisis.

GLOSSARY

activist

a person who campaigns for political or social change

bystanders

people who watch an event but do not take part in it

child support

court-ordered payments to support one's minor children

choke hold

a tight grip around a person's neck that restrains the person by restricting his or her breathing

dispatcher

a person who receives emergency calls and organizes the response of emergency services

grand jury

a group of citizens that decides whether criminal charges should be brought against someone

looted

stole goods from a business during widespread upheaval

tear gas

gas used to force crowds to disperse

vandalized

destroyed or damaged on purpose

SOURCE NOTES

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