



Connecticut Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Statement Condemning Racism in the Criminal Justice System And Committing to Continue to Examine Racial Disparities in Connecticut Policing

July 20, 2020

The members of the Connecticut Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights add their voices to the growing chorus of Commission Advisory Committees affirming the fundamental right of all people to be free from all forms of racism and racial bias in their interactions with the criminal justice system.¹ This issue has come into national focus recently because of the widely reported tragic deaths of several Black people at the hands of police officers during the COVID-19 crisis. Sadly, fatal police interactions are nothing new to communities of color in Connecticut. And they are just one particularly tragic example of the scourge of racial disparities in interactions with the criminal justice system that this Advisory Committee has investigated in recent years.

As a civil rights advisory committee, we are united against all forms of prejudice and bigotry, and we will continue to advocate for transformation of the systems that perpetuate and enforce systemic racism.² We affirm in the strongest possible terms the inherent dignity and value of every human life, regardless of race, color, religion, sex, age, disability, or national origin.

Consistent with this conviction, we have focused our prior work on eliminating bias in policing, prosecutorial processes and practices, and correctional systems. Specifically, in the past decade, the Committee has examined racial profiling, solitary confinement, prosecutorial appointments and prosecutorial practices in Connecticut. Each project has

¹ U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Unanimously Condemns the Killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and Calls on the Department of Justice to Enforce Federal Civil Rights Laws that Protect Americans from Unconstitutional Policing Practices*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.usccr.gov/press/2020/06-05-Pattern-or-Practice-Statement.pdf>; see also U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Minnesota Advisory Committee, *Minnesota Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Urges Police Reform based on 2018 Report on Police Practices*, June 8, 2020, <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2018/03-22-MN-Civil-Rights.pdf>; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Massachusetts Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights Issues Statement in Regard to Police Killings and Police Practices*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2020-07-17-MA-SAC-Statement-of-Concern-on-Shootings.pdf>. See generally <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/sac.php> (links to other Advisory Committee Statements of Concern on police shootings).

² On July 20, 2020, the Connecticut Advisory Committee approved this statement unanimously. The Statement is updated to reflect legislation passed nine days after the Committee issued the statement.

revealed troubling racial disparities in the operation of Connecticut’s criminal justice system. The evidence we have seen is overwhelming that racial bias undermines the criminal justice system’s goals of promoting public safety and rehabilitating offenders.

These Committee examinations called for reforms in legislation, policies, and training to combat the harms of the invidious use of race in the criminal justice system. We have also called for improved data collection efforts to allow policy makers to understand the extent of the problem and find data-driven solutions.³

Some of our recommendations have been implemented, either through legislative action or through policy changes at the state and local level. We have also been heartened by the sincere efforts we have seen for anti-bias initiatives among many police leaders, prosecutors, correctional officials, and policymakers in Connecticut.

But the recent police shootings are a sobering reminder of the work that still needs to be done, both in Connecticut and across the country. 155 years after the Thirteenth Amendment abolished slavery, 66 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* legally ended Jim Crow, and 57 years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his dream on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, our nation and state continue to struggle to, in Dr. King’s words, “live up to the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.’” And there is no greater reminder of persistent inequality than the taking of a life by a police officer under circumstances tinged with racial bias.

The data on fatal police interactions is troubling. After an unarmed Black man, Michael Brown, was killed in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, *The Washington Post* started to track fatal shootings by on-duty police officers. In the past five years, the paper recorded over 5,000 fatal police shootings.⁴ The data collected show that Black and Latino people are shot at a disproportionate rate as compared to those of other races.⁵

In Connecticut, *The Washington Post* reports 21 fatal police shootings over the past five years. Of these, three of the victims (14.3 percent) were Black and six of the victims (28.6 percent) were Latino.⁶ In comparison, the Census Bureau reports that Connecticut’s population is 12.2 percent Black and 16.9 percent Latino.⁷

Remedial efforts continue. A week after the Advisory Committee issued this Statement, the Legislature passed police accountability legislation that Senator Gary Winfield, co-chairman of the Judiciary Committee, noted was a first step in addressing “the systemic

³ Even where data collection efforts have been made, the data have not always been reliable. For example, after Mr. Brown’s 2014 death, a *Washington Post* investigation found that the FBI undercounted fatal police shootings by more than half. The *Post* concluded that this undercounting resulted because reporting by police departments is voluntary and many departments fail to do so. *Washington Post*, “Fatal Force,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/> (accessed July 20, 2020).

⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁵ *Ibid.*. Black people comprise less than 13 percent of the U.S. population but are killed by police at more than twice the rate of white Americans. This needs a cite.

⁶ *Ibid.*.

⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Quick Facts, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/CT> (accessed July 20, 2020).

and racist policies that exist in this system [but are] not be solved by one piece of legislation.”⁸ The Committee’s examinations into racial disparities in the criminal justice system confirm Senator Winfield’s assertion that the legislation is an acknowledgement that “these entrenched, systemic behaviors are unacceptable, and change is needed.”⁹

Connecticut’s legislative leaders have also signaled that further reforms will be considered during the regular legislative session that begins in January 2021.

The Committee applauds the willingness of Connecticut’s elected leaders to confront the difficult but critically important issue of protecting civil rights in police interactions. In between the 2020 special session and the 2021 regular session, the Committee intends to examine any reform legislation enacted and any further legislation proposed. The Connecticut Advisory Committee will monitor and investigate the benefits of this legislation and how it may improve the protection of Connecticut citizens’ civil rights.

The Committee plans to hold public briefings this Fall to hear from experts on policing practices as well as advocates, community leaders, and affected citizens. The Committee will review alternative methods and ideas from local and national resources to improve police transparency and accountability and to prevent police violence and fatal shootings in Connecticut, which disproportionately impact Black and Brown residents. We will report back to the Commission with our observations and recommendation for further policing reform in Connecticut.

We commit ourselves and our committee to work with lawmakers, government officials, law enforcement, and community organizations to further our Connecticut’s commitment to justice for all.

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⁸ Ken Dixon, “CT Senate passes police reforms 21-15,” ctpost, July 29, 2020, <https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/CT-Senate-readies-vote-on-police-reforms-15441034.php><https://www.ctpost.com/local/article/CT-Senate-readies-vote-on-police-reforms-15441034.php> (accessed July 30, 2020).

⁹ Ibid.