

WE ARE ALL CRIMINALS

Friends,

Last week, violence tore through our nation. Cell phone video shows a father in Louisiana pinned to the pavement outside of a convenience store; Alton had been selling CDs one minute, and on the ground the next. He was shot several times and killed by one of the officers who held him down. The next day in Minnesota, a police officer shot a man in his car as the man reached for his own wallet. Cell phone video shows the moment Philando died, still buckled in, inches away from his girlfriend and her four-year old daughter. On Thursday, five officers in Texas were killed by a gunman, transforming a peaceful march against police violence into a scene of chaos and tragedy.

We mourn the loss of Philando's life, Alton's life, and the lives of the officers killed in Dallas. We grieve for each person's family and friends. Across the United States, wounds that have not had the chance to heal, or the change to allow healing, have been ripped open yet again. Amid the cries for justice, peace, and the end to targeted and brutal policing of black and brown bodies, there are countless questions that simmer below the surface, often rising to the top of our media feeds and watercooler conversations as we try to make sense of the world we live in. We Are All Criminals would like to speak briefly to two of those questions that we find deeply disheartening. They pertain to criminality and compliance.

Regarding criminality:

"He was a felon. A thug. A criminal." How many times have we heard people mitigate their concern over the loss of life by examining one's rap sheet?

If the men and women who have shared their *luxury-to-forget* stories with WAAC were killed by police, we would mourn them as lost fathers, sisters, lawyers, leaders, scholars, and students. If they had been caught, we would label them, even in death, *a felon. A thug. A criminal.* Our collective hearts would not ache as acutely. Their families would be forced to fight for acknowledgment of their deceased love one's worth: *he was a good man, she was not a criminal, he had turned his life around.*

Our compassion must not be contingent upon a criminal background check. We, as a society, must either believe people deserve to be treated like human beings, with dignity and respect, or not.

At WAAC, we attempt to disrupt 'othering'—that response that facilitates valuing the lives of some while dismissing the lives of others. And we thank you for being a part of this movement to embrace one another's whole selves as full and flawed human beings. Thank you for supporting us as we challenge bias and

prejudice, and working with us to spread commonality rather than dehumanization, love instead of fear.

Regarding compliance:

Throughout many of the WAAC interviews, interviewees recalled being dismissive, openly irritated, and at times even hostile to police when stopped or questioned. While their response to law enforcement may not have been commendable, it certainly was not condemnable by death. As a reminder, these are individuals who committed criminal acts but were not caught; even when their actions resulted in police contact, they were released without cuffs or citation. None were arrested, much less Tasered, choked, or shot.

Yet, one all-too-common public reaction to an officer-involved death is to question why the deceased didn't comply. *Why did they talk back? Why didn't they stop? Why did they resist?*

Oscar Grant had been celebrating New Year's Eve with friends when a fight broke out on the train. Several people, including Oscar, were cuffed on the platform. Oscar was bound and on his stomach when an officer shot him in the back; he died before sunrise. *You shot me*, a witness heard him say. *I got a four year-old daughter!*

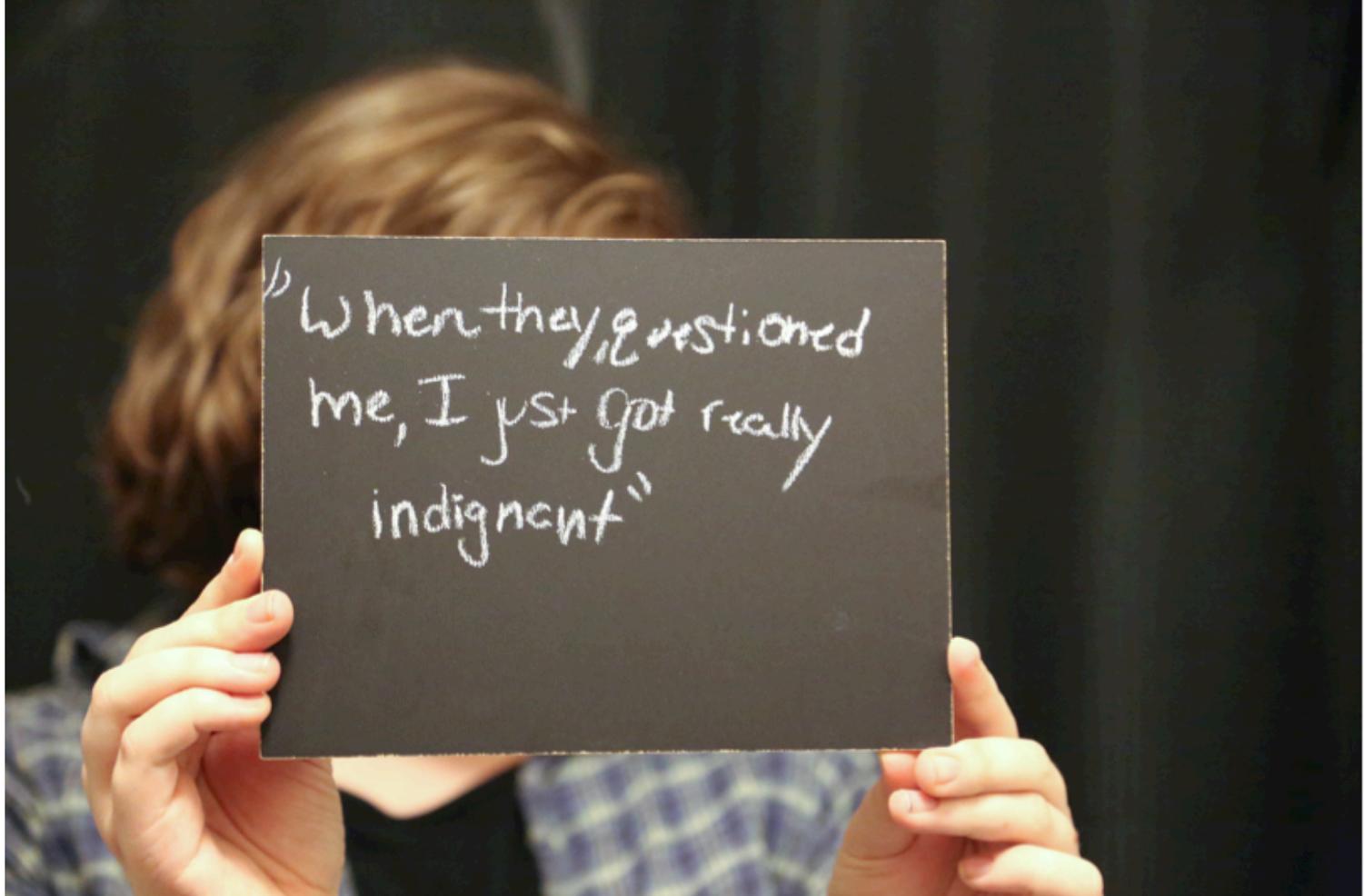
Eric Garner refused to be arrested on the accusation he was selling loose cigarettes. A swarm of officers descended upon him, wrapping their arms around his neck, and forcing his face into the ground. Eric pleaded for breath eleven times. *I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe.* He lost consciousness; an hour later, he died.

A 25 year-old Freddie Gray ran after making eye contact with police. After he was chased down, police found a switchblade in his pocket. Video of Freddie's arrest shows him limp, screaming in pain. By the time he arrived at the police station, he wasn't breathing. One week later, he died.

Walter Scott was pulled over for a nonfunctioning third brake light. He leapt out of the car and ran behind a building, the officer following on foot. Moments later five of the officer's eight bullets fired hit Walter in the back. He took my Taser, said the cop. A cellphone video shows the officer calmly firing at Walter, fleeing and unarmed. Dashcam video shows that when the officer pulled Walter over, he was listening to Everclear's What It's Like, a song about prejudice and empathy: *God forbid you ever had to walk a mile in his shoes / 'Cause then you really might know what it's like to sing the blues.*

Sandra Bland was stopped for failing to signal a lane change. Her subsequent refusal to put out a cigarette in her own car led to the officer aiming his Taser at her and shouting, *I will light you up! Get out! Now!* Three days later, she was found dead in her jail cell.

Each was black, and each life mattered.



WAAC participant's reaction to being pulled over

Participants of WAAC (many of whom are white and middle class or upper-middle class) recall running from police, failing to comply with demands to drop fake guns, and more; the participants were told to 'carry on,' 'go home,' or 'walk it off.' Yet each of the people named above did little more—or much, much less—than many of the people interviewed in WAAC.

Some participants remember officers laughing with or at them; others said the police confided that the participants reminded the officers a bit of themselves. None of the participants was shot. None was viewed as a threat, a danger due to the color of their skin. Each went back to school or work or home to their families. Each went on with life.

We at WAAC work to break down barriers between 'us and them.' By closing the chasms that separate our empathies, we work to ensure that more people go back to school or work or home to their families. That more go on with life.

Thank you for being a part of this work, a part of this change.

FEATURED STORY



More Than My Mugshot participant. MTMM is a collection of narratives from people with criminal records, each of whom is more than their worst moment.

I carry them with me. The things I've done and got away with, the things I didn't do and was accused of.

I was in a gang, a brotherhood. I was rebellious and reckless and for one night, I was kind of a ringleader. Actually, I was the ringleader.

We took some things from someone who had taken even more from our neighborhood; I got on the first bus out of town before he could figure out who did it. I needed the distance and I needed the sun.

On the Greyhound, two time zones away, a cop came on board. These your bags? He asked, pointing to the duffels without the drugs. Yep. Just those.

He emptied them out on the seat behind me: socks, t-shirts, and a PS2, but not much else. He seemed disappointed; I was beside myself with relief.

In the desert, I got perspective. My life had flashed before my eyes on that bus, with that cop. I wouldn't be here today if he had checked the other bag, that I know. I didn't even think about what could have happened until it almost did.

So when I came back home, I decided I wanted to improve my community and the day my oldest daughter was born, I knew I wanted to build a legacy for her.

I could do better. We could do better. I took every organizing and leadership class I could get into; for three years, I volunteered in every program that would take me.

When my youngest was born, I was ready to buckle down.

I started my own program mentoring youth. Helping them recognize their unique value, arming them with critical thinking skills necessary to question the world.

It was incredible—the rush you get from creating something. By being successful at something you love.

And I almost lost it all. I was accused of assaulting a friend of a friend and spent a week in jail. The deal was tempting: plead to this little thing you didn't do, and we'll drop the bigger thing you also didn't do. I wanted to be done with it, so I took it. When I got home, I was so hurt, so upset. Here I was trying to figure out my life, do something better—and this could take it all away.

Once you get that first mark, it's easier to get a second one. I was driving with my dad and daughter when the cop pulled us over. He yanked me out of the passenger's seat by my collar, slamming me into a telephone pole—you know, the ones covered in old nails and staples? So these nails are piercing my skin and my daughter's screaming and my dad is saying what the hell is going on?

I was back in jail. Eventually, the charges were dropped, but it sticks with me. Having to define myself by what I'm not. And if I'm always just responding to what I'm not, you're not going to hear what I am.

I'm a father.

I'm a son.

I'm a leader.

I'm a dreamer.

I'm a community organizer.

I'm a natural problem solver.

I've mentored more than 300 youth in the city.

I was recognized by the mayor; I was lauded by the governor.

And I'm working every day to build that legacy for my kids, to make this country and this world a better place.

Support WAAC

Your support helps us build empathy and change the narrative, one story at a time.

WAAC is grateful to The Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota for its generous support of our work.