

## **What does the police killing of George Floyd mean for LSE's International Inequalities Institute?**

**Francisco H. G. Ferreira**

On May 25, a white police officer named Derek Chauvin knelt on George Floyd's neck for nearly nine minutes on a Minneapolis street, while the unarmed African American man repeatedly complained that he couldn't breathe. Floyd, who had been arrested on suspicion of using a counterfeit \$20 bill to purchase cigarettes, became unresponsive and later died. While particularly graphic, this violent death of a black man at the hands of white police officers is only the latest in a long series, including Michael Brown in Ferguson (Missouri) Eric Garner in New York City, and Breonna Taylor in Louisville (KY), to name but a very few. A high-quality video of the horrific killing went viral on the internet, and hundreds of thousands of Americans – and people in other countries – have since joined massive street protests calling for justice. In some cases – notably in the Trump Administration's order for the National Guard to clear Lafayette Park (across from the White House) of peaceful protesters so the President could walk across it for a photo-op – the response of those in power has compounded the anger in the streets.

Floyd's killing was particularly brutal and unprovoked, and all the more terrifying because it was perpetrated in plain view by officer(s) of the very institution charged to protect *all* citizens from crime. It was a morally repugnant act, and all reasonable people will agree to condemn it. But it was so much more than that. It was the latest – egregious – manifestation of deep and pervasive racial inequalities in America – and so many other countries in the world. For me, as I prepare to join the International Inequalities Institute, this tragic event reaffirms **four sad facts** about inequality:

1. Inequalities come in different shapes, sizes and forms. None are worse than the **ascriptive or horizontal inequalities** that exist among people merely because of some innate characteristic they could not choose and are not responsible for – such as race, gender or caste, of course, but also family background or country of birth. Through this lens, Floyd's killing is no different from the murder of so many Indian girls by male relatives, for some perceived insult to family honour. Or from the routine murder of young (often black) Brazilian slum-dwellers by a police force that is many times more violent than that of the US. Or from the Rohingya genocide in Myanmar

and neighbouring Bangladesh. Or from the racist murders of North African and Middle Eastern immigrants in Europe; or from the violence frequently visited on indigenous peoples around the world.

2. Inequalities, as Charles Tilly notably reminded us, are **durable and persistent**. It has now been 155 years since slavery was abolished in the United States. 131 years since it was abolished in Brazil. Yet, in these two countries and so many others, the legacy of that brutal institution persists – in unequal levels of income and wealth; in unequal schooling opportunities and health outcomes (including in the COVID-19 pandemic) and, perhaps most egregiously, in the treatment people are afforded by the institutions of government, including the police force.

3. **Inequalities are multiple and interconnected**. African-Americans like Mr. Floyd are disproportionately likely to be searched, arrested and killed by the police. They are also more likely to hold front-line service jobs with greater exposure to the COVID-19 illness (from nursing jobs to supermarket staff). On average, they earn lower incomes and have lower educational achievements. And they are under-represented in the hierarchies of power in both the public and private sectors. These are not coincidences: inequality in one dimension shapes and promotes inequality in another. There are vicious circles between educational, wealth and power inequalities (as I suggested [here](#) long ago) – and the inequalities in power vis-à-vis the State are perhaps the worst of all.

4. And yet, **inequalities can be challenged**, as peaceful and not-so-peaceful protesters in over 100 cities in the US have recently reminded us. As the #MeToo movement proved for gender inequalities in power. As so many union and political movements have shown around the world and throughout history – sometimes successfully!

These inequalities will, in my view, be more successfully and durably challenged if those challenging them and fighting for a fairer world are well informed of their historical, social and economic origins. As Mike Savage has noted in his post, that is our job at the International Inequalities Institute. To shed a critical, dispassionate light on the causes, nature and consequences of all forms of inequality, so better understanding them can equip us to better fight them. It is a job now more urgent than ever.

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