

BLACK LIVES MATTER IN EUROPE TOO

An explainer

Background

The brutal killing of unarmed African-American George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, when a white police officer pressed a knee to his neck for 8 minutes 46 seconds while he cried "I can't breathe", horrified the world and sparked protests worldwide. Hundreds of thousands took to streets across Europe to show solidarity with Black victims of injustice in the United States, but also to show that Black people in Europe face similar brutality. As if to prove the point, protesters in Stockholm and Paris were tear-gassed and pepper sprayed just as European leaders condemned Donald Trump for doing the same outside the White House.

#BlackLivesMatter

In 2013, three Black women - Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi - created the #BlackLivesMatter project to seek justice when the killer of 17-year-old Trayvon Martin walked free. "Black Lives Matter" grew into a rallying cry against police brutality towards Black people following the 2014 murder of Michael Brown by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, and the brutal suppression of those peacefully protesting Brown's killing. Since then, the movement has demanded justice for Freddie Gray (Baltimore, 2015), Sandra Bland (Texas, 2015), Philandro Castile (Minnesota, 2016), Breonna Taylor (Kentucky, 2020), to name but a few, gaining global momentum following Floyd's murder.

BEING BLACK IN THE EU

TIME'S UP ON RACISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE!

People of African Descent in Europe



Source: Survey of almost 6,000 people of African descent in 12 EU Member States by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, November 2018. Icons from www.freepik.com

What our MEPs say



Younous Omarjee
(La France Insoumise, France)

"The European Parliament shouldn't only condemn racist acts and police violence, we must also seize this historic opportunity by establishing a European Day for commemorating the end of slavery, and to recognise slavery as a crime against humanity"

We Can't Breathe: Many continents, One problem

"I can't breathe" first gained prominence in 2014 when Eric Garner shouted it during a chokehold by a New York police officer that would take his life. In 2016, Adama Traoré said it again as he was crushed by the combined weight of three gendarmes in France. Traoré's unpunished killers continue to serve as police, some even receiving commendation for their role suppressing the ensuing protests. Following Floyd's death, Adama's sister Assa led tens of thousands through Paris, demanding justice for her brother and for other people of colour asphyxiated or crushed in French police custody: Amadou Koumé (2015), Hakim Ajimi (2008), Lamine Dieng (2007). Government promises to end chokeholds have already been overturned by police counter-protests.

Police claimed Black lives across Europe: Mitch Henriquez (2015) in the Netherlands who, like Floyd and Traoré, died from asphyxiation after arrest in an independent autopsy, but not in the police autopsy. Maxwell Itoya (2010), shot by police at a market raid in Poland. Seibane Wague (2004) and Edwin Ndupu (2006), both died while restrained and sedated by Austrian police. Adil Charrot (Age 19) and Mehdi Bouda (Age 17), teenagers mown down by police vehicles in Brussels within the last year.

Migrants Lives Matter

Asylum-seekers and migrants fleeing persecution are also among the dead: Achidi John (2001), forced to take vomit-inducing drugs, and Oury Jalloh (2005), burned to death in his cell, in Germany. Two-year-old Mawda Shawri (2018), shot in the face during a police chase in Belgium. The death of 18-year-old Ilyas Tahiri (2019) from asphyxiation, constrained by six agents in a migrant holding centre in Spain, drew parallels with Floyd's killing, with activists demanding an end to inhuman treatment of migrants at Denmark's Ellbæk Immigration Centre, Ireland's Direct Provision centres, and by Greek and Croatian border police.

Racial Discrimination by Police unchecked in Europe

During recent protests, the city of Berlin adopted a new anti-discrimination law to combat racial profiling, but despite UN reports and national court decisions, the practice continues across the EU, violating the freedom from racial discrimination guaranteed by Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights. According to a 2018 survey of 6,000 people of African descent, 44% of those stopped by police believed it was racially motivated. A majority (64%) of victims of racist violence did not report the most recent incident to police, believing it pointless, or fearing the police, with one in ten claiming law enforcement were perpetrators. Trust in police is lowest in Austria, where police stopped two-thirds in the five years before the survey.

Thousands of police in France exposed sharing racist, homophobic, and sexist content in social media groups faced no punishment. The attention video proof drew to Floyd's murder demonstrates the importance of being able to record instances of police wrongdoing, but gag laws like Spain's Ley Mordaza prohibit the sharing of footage showing police, meaning a bystander beaten unconscious by police in Madrid near a protest over Mame Mbaye's death in 2018 could not garner similar attention. Europe also remains far behind the US in terms of body cams and anti-bias training for police.