

**Statement in Response to the Staten Island Grand Jury  
Not Indicting a Police Officer  
in the Death of Eric Garner**

**December 4, 2014**

The National Association of Social Workers, New York City Chapter, joins with a great many New Yorkers in the painful disbelief that a police officer, caught on video using an illegal choke hold, leading to the death of an unarmed Black man, was not indicted and will not face criminal charges.

That this follows by two weeks the failure to bring charges against a policemen in Ferguson, Missouri in the death of another unarmed Black man, Michael Brown, makes the situation in New York even more troubling.

In the past two years, NASW-NYC has spoken out about the concerns of biased and inequitable treatment of people of color, especially against men, by the police. This relates to the use until recently in New York City of stop and frisk and the continuing policy of arresting people of color for low level crimes under what is called “broken windows theory.” This also relates to the acquittal of George Zimmerman in the death of Trayvon Martin in Florida, as he was protected by the state’s “Stand Your Ground” law.

While each of these incidents raises serious issues about policing, there are deeper societal issues at work. Until they are addressed, attempts at remedies—if they are agreed to at all—will not make much difference moving forward.

We must examine the multifaceted nature of racism in the United States, beyond the actions of single individuals. This relates to the history in the United States stemming from slavery through Jim Crow in the South to more recent, and still current, drug policies that disproportionately target communities of color despite similar incidence of illegal drug use in white communities.

Racism is also displayed in the current policies that benefit certain communities over others, including the passing of laws to suppress the vote among people of color in many states.

Over the past ten years, NASW-NYC has been encouraging social workers, as well as leaders of human service organizations, to seek training in understanding and ameliorating the effects of racism within our own spheres of experience and influence. We recognize that in our own profession not everyone has the same perspective on racism, including why people are poor.

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Training offers the opportunity to move toward a common understanding of the multitude of forces at work, to see through each other's eyes, and to begin conversations that authentically address the most challenging social issues that divide us. Training is not a magic bullet but realistically requires a process to unfold, over time. It first needs to start.

The criminal justice system, including police departments, will need to change if we are to avoid the types of incidents we have been experiencing in the deaths of men like Eric Garner, Michael Brown and Trayvon Martin. For this change to take place, a willingness to discuss the structural and systemic nature of racism will be essential.

This is what is needed within the New York City Police Department, just as it is essential in our own social work and human services community. Racism is dehumanizing to everyone it touches. Addressing it is a matter of life and death.

