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It's a Matter of Human Rights

Police Violence Against a South Carolina High School Student and What it Raises For Social Workers Everywhere

According to the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948:

Article 5

- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 7

- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Social workers are called by our Code of Ethics to respond to the latest human rights violation captured by videos of a white South Carolina Deputy Sheriff and resource officer, Ben Fields, violently slamming a 16-year-old high school girl backwards in her chair and then throwing her across a classroom for the “crime” of refusing to put away her cell phone.

If it were not for people who capture and post videos of human rights violations, of which this is one more example, many would never know about the repeated pattern and practice of violence experienced by communities of color.

As social workers, we are bound by our Code of Ethics to advocate for systems change in the face of oppression and not to explain away oppressive tactics by “blaming the victim.” We understand that this act of aggression against the high school student in South Carolina is not an isolated incident, but a growing practice of criminalizing students of color for things that go mostly unnoticed when done by white students. We understand that this is part of the greater issue of systemic oppression and human rights violations, and it is our responsibility to educate ourselves toward developing a macro context lens that impacts micro practices.

This macro trend of oppression is well documented in the nation's largest study on student discipline, *Breaking School Rules: How School Discipline Relates to Academic and Juvenile Justice Outcomes*. It is further explored in a soon to be released book *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools* by Monique W. Morris.

In *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced and Underprotected*, Columbia University law professor Kimberle Williams Crenshaw and her associates, Priscilla Ocen and Jyoti Nanda, explain that girls of color in New York City and Boston public schools are subject to discipline that is harsher and more frequent than that of their white peers, and they are six times more likely to be suspended than white girls. They report that the discrepancy is even greater for black girls.

So, Officer Ben Fields was fired. We support the growing demand to hold him accountable for the violation of the human rights of the child. But the arrest and prosecution of one perpetrator will do nothing to address the broad application of violence. This incident is but one arm of the pattern and practice of oppression that we see repeatedly, in so many ways. It is a manifestation of the structural racism embedded at the groundwater level of all the systems and institutions in this country and in all the systems where we work.

Institutional racism is one of our nation's greatest barriers to reaching its potential. It causes ongoing trauma in communities of color and damages the humanity of the white community. In our work we observe the ongoing impact of historical trauma experienced by people of color since enslavement and continuing into the 21st Century. Trauma interferes with self-actualization and fulfillment of potential—both for those who experience it and those who witness it. Racism engenders fear of moving outside of segregated communities; of having meaningful cross-racial dialogues; of authentic interracial relationships; and it challenges the mental health of our nation.

The social work community cannot continue to offer symptom management to people suffering from the effects of trauma without speaking to the structures that continue to inflict trauma on individuals, families, and communities.

- We have a responsibility to organize our collective humanity for root cause change.
- We are accountable by our Code of Ethics to actions that dismantle manifestations of structural racism.
- We must challenge laws and policies like those embedded in South Carolina school discipline code policies that criminalize the behavior of children of color. The racially based, disproportionate application of these types of procedures legalizes, maintains, and upholds structural racism.

Our profession requires an understanding of structural racism and the impact it has on our citizenry. We call on NASW's national and chapter leaders to **JOIN US** in the work of undoing racism and work collectively to establish race competencies for the profession.

We must move forward with a common analysis in order to address structural racism at its root cause and at the ground level of its source. We must not become hopeless, numb, silent, and immobilized. We must use our skills and our profession to stand in solidarity with the communities we serve in order to create a future of equity, justice, and hope, as our professional values and ethics demand.