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# Civil Disobedience, Social Justice, Nationalism & Populism, Violent Demonstrations and Race Relations

## Black Lives Matter

by Michael Ruth

Black Lives Matter is an American social activist organization devoted to stopping violence and injustice against African Americans. The group was founded in 2013 following the acquittal of George Zimmerman, who had been charged with murdering black teen Trayvon Martin. Over the next few years, the Black Lives Matter movement swelled in popularity, particularly after several incidents of police brutality involving African Americans began permeating national news. In 2015, Black Lives Matter activists protested for racial equality at various events held by 2016 presidential election candidates.

## Origin of the Group

The Black Lives Matter movement began forming in July 2013, following the acquittal of George Zimmerman. In 2012, Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchman in the city of Sanford, Florida, shot and killed unarmed seventeen-year-old African American Trayvon Martin. Zimmerman claimed he shot Martin in self-defense after Martin attacked him.

Zimmerman ultimately was acquitted of second-degree murder in the summer of 2013. In response to the verdict, African Americans across the United States erupted in angry protests, claiming their government did not care about seeking justice for African Americans.

The Zimmerman verdict greatly upset African American woman Alicia Garza, who had heard the news in an Oakland, California, bar. She later claimed that she and the other African Americans in the bar felt simultaneously saddened and infuriated. To them, the acquittal of Martin's killer confirmed that racism and white supremacy were still real threats to African Americans in the United States.

"Hands up!" sign displayed at a Ferguson protest. By Jamelle Bouie.



Moved by the event, Garza wrote an extended Facebook post detailing her feelings about the place of African Americans in the contemporary United States. She concluded the message by telling African Americans she loved them and that their lives mattered.

Garza's friend Patrisse Cullors, a community organizer, was inspired by Garza's post and began sharing the message with others online. Every time Cullors reposted Garza's message on social media sites, she used the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. Garza and Cullors then began discussing how they could create a national activist campaign for their convictions about the continued mistreatment of African Americans by white society.

Garza and Cullors joined with immigrant rights activist Opal Tometi to begin taking their message online. Using social media websites such as Tumblr and Twitter, the women requested that users across the United States use the hashtag #blacklivesmatter to share their own views on why black lives matter in twenty-first-century America.

Thus, the Black Lives Matter movement began. Initially, the organization consisted only of Garza, Cullors, and Tometi. Garza started making Black Lives Matter protest signs for display in storefront windows while Cullors led a protest march in Beverly Hills, California, holding a sign bearing the hashtag #blacklivesmatter. Although these efforts brought Black Lives Matter some degree of attention, the movement did not gain a large and enthusiastic national audience until 2014.

## Rise to Prominence

Black Lives Matter quickly became known throughout the United States in mid-2014 following its responses to several cases of alleged police brutality involving African American victims.

The first incident was the killing of forty-three-year-old Eric Garner by white police officer Daniel Pantaleo in Staten Island in July 2014. Garner died of asphyxiation after Pantaleo placed him in a chokehold while arresting him for selling cigarettes.

African Americans in New York and across the United States reacted angrily to Garner's death. Their protests of police brutality included signs reading "black lives matter," indicating that awareness of the movement had spread to New York. Protesters invoked the phrase again in December 2014, when a grand jury chose not to indict Pantaleo for killing Garner.

The Black Lives Matter movement earned its greatest national exposure in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014, after the shooting death of African American Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson. Much was made in the media about the fact that the eighteen-year-old Brown had been unarmed when Wilson shot and killed him.

The African American population of Ferguson protested, with a small number of people who looted stores, and were met with a heavily armed and militarized police force in the days after Brown's death. The police retaliated aggressively, firing smoke, tear gas and rubber bullets without warning into crowds, and mandated "vague and arbitrary" rules of telling protestors they were not allowed to stand still in a certain place more than five seconds. Seeing the chaos on television, Garza, Cullors, and Tometi traveled to Ferguson under the #blacklivesmatter banner. They arrived to find many protesters already holding "black lives matter" signs.

In the wake of the Ferguson riots, more than five hundred people in eighteen cities across the United States joined the Black Lives Matter initiative. They called for equality for black people in society, education, employment, and the justice system.

Over the next several months, following several more incidents of police violence against African Americans, the #blacklivesmatter logo became more popular than ever. It began appearing on all manner of merchandise, and the phrase itself was even employed by politician Hillary Clinton in a December 2014 speech on human rights. In January 2015, the American Dialect Society named the hashtag #blacklivesmatter its word of the year.

By mid-2015, nearly thirty Black Lives Matter chapters had formed throughout the United States. Around this time, activists from the movement began soliciting attention from the candidates running for president in the 2016 election.

In July 2015, for example, members of the organization interrupted an event featuring Democratic candidates Bernie Sanders and Martin O'Malley. The activists took control of the stage and spoke briefly about black inequality in the United States. The next month, Black Lives Matter activists interrupted an event at which Sanders was speaking. The individuals again spoke of racism and racial inequality in America. Clinton, then the Democratic frontrunner for the presidential nomination, held a dedicated meeting with Black Lives Matter representatives in October 2015 to further discuss her policies regarding criminal justice and African American communities; much of this discussion helped to shape her subsequent criminal justice platform in her campaign. In recognition of their activist efforts, *Time* magazine included the Black Lives Matter movement on its short list for person of the year in 2015.

Black Lives Matter protests and demonstrations continue to appear periodically in the national news.

In July 2016, the movement drew criticism when, during a Black Lives Matter march in the streets of Dallas protesting police shootings of two African American men in Minnesota and Louisiana, a sniper shot and killed five police officers. In an interview after the incident and the takedown of the perpetrator, the Dallas police chief claimed that the sniper had indicated that he had a problem with Black Lives Matter, and other commentators suggested that the rhetoric of the movement had inspired him to take the violent measure. Representatives for Black Lives Matter, however, insisted that the movement and its chapters do not condone violence. While

protestors took the streets once more within days following the shootings, activists worried that their message would be overwhelmed by doubt and criticism surrounding the killings of the officers.

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