

# In Search of a Critical Mass: Do Black Lives Matter in Criminology and Criminal Justice Programs?

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The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement arose following the untimely killing of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black teenager, at the hands of George Zimmerman, a White man who was subsequently acquitted of all charges. BLM has again been propelled back into the global spotlight due to the highly publicized killings of George Floyd, Eric Garner, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Daunte Wright, and far too many other Black Americans. The atrocities perpetrated against Black people at the hands of Whites and police has reinvanized a diverse coalition of advocates' impassioned outcries for racial justice. BLM casts a critical focus on a historically uncomfortable reality that continues to plague Black lives—systemic racism. BLM brings heightened attention to the inequality and injustices that Blacks and other people of color routinely endure, despite more than 65 years of civil rights legislation. Equal treatment within justice, education, healthcare, housing, and employment systems, while constitutionally protected, has been elusive for marginalized people and the communities that they comprise (Bell, 2020; Feagin, 2006; Pager & Shepherd, 2008). Scholarly research has well documented the collective harms resulting from inequalities across a spectrum of social and formal institutions in the United States (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Hughes & Thomas, 1998; Ray & Seamster, 2016; Reskin, 2012).

BLM's meteoric rise has captured the attention of policymakers, politicians, activists, academics, and mainstream media. In fact, BLM has become an international phenomenon, highlighting systematic inequality and disenfranchisement of people of color throughout the world. Intense frustration stemming from the devaluation of the experiences, achievements, and lives of people of color continues to fuel

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the movement in the form of street protests, boycotts, rallies, and aggressive social media campaigns. BLM actions have undoubtedly stimulated conversation and thoughtful discourse concerning the longstanding discrimination and disenfranchisement of Blacks (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2017).

Soon after George Floyd's murder, academic institutions (and corporations) launched anti-racist campaigns along with a steady stream of proclamations in support of Black lives. University administrators' pledges to increased diversity and inclusion are meaningless, however, if they are not backed by remedial actions designed to address the shortage of Black scholars (as well as other faculty of color) across academia. Despite repeated public statements and strategic planning efforts, little has changed in academe. In particular, Black faculty continue to face hardships that often place them in marginalized positions (Griffin et al., 2011; Hussar et al., 2020; Kelly et al., 2017). Admittedly, academia is a privileged space in general; however, the most coveted freedoms are disproportionately distributed. The glaring disproportionality in part reflects the lack of genuine commitment to improved diversity and inclusion. Although academic institutions routinely extol the benefits that diverse environments provide students, staff, and faculty, they rarely dedicate long-range funding to such endeavors or customarily offer concrete guidance regarding how to make academia more inclusive (Bell, 2020).

The essays presented within this issue document a wide range of injuries experienced by Black scholars. Specifically, this special issue examines BLM through the lens of Black faculty members' lived experiences. Through their candid narratives, the contributors document the myriad ways Black lives matter less in the academy. An underlying theme of racial and gender bias are inherently woven throughout the assembled essays; in part, implicating race, gender, and intersectionality as profound risk factors for hindered career success. The authors' detailed accounts include, but are not limited to, being racially profiled by campus police, a lack of professionalism exhibited during a job interview, and being subjected to bullying and violent rhetoric. Overall, these accumulated negative experiences serve to reinforce broader societal views that Black lives do not matter, even in the institutions that tirelessly tout the virtues of diversity and inclusion. Moreover, the dearth of Black scholars within academic institutions is consistently identified as a major contributor to their adverse experiences (Griffin et al., 2011; Johnsrud & Sadao, 1998; Kelly et al., 2017).

In light of BLM and the collective wisdom gleaned from the heartfelt essays included in this special issue, we revisit Miller and Brunson's decade-old essay regarding whether there has been growth in the number of minority scholars within leading criminology and criminal justice programs (Miller & Brunson, 2011). In this essay, the authors noted that "it is not just numbers that matter, but other factors as well, including the relative status of majority and minority group members" (Miller & Brunson, 2011, pp. 1–3).

One would hope to see an improvement in minority representation 10 years later. An examination of the leading 15 criminology and criminal justice programs based on the *U.S. News and World Report's* 2021 rankings paint a dismal picture, however. In particular, only two programs have three tenured or tenure-track Black faculty.

Regrettably, comparing recent figures to Miller and Brunson's (2011) findings, there does not appear to be much progress in obtaining clusters, or a critical mass, of Black scholars within top programs. Miller and Brunson (2011) observed more than a decade ago that few programs have more than one Black faculty member, a trend that unfortunately continues today. Furthermore, as Mitchell (this issue) argues, a "critical mass of Black professors [is] necessary to fully realize their benefits and for these scholars to attain their full potential." As several of the founding programs in our field celebrate milestone anniversaries, we must acknowledge the significant challenges stemming from the limited number of Black scholars being hired, promoted, and appointed to leadership roles.

Several of the contributors to this volume enumerate myriad concrete benefits of achieving a critical mass of Black faculty. For example, reducing social isolation, increasing productivity, reducing service burdens, and achieving more equitable treatment have all been offered as aspirational goals. It is important to underscore, however, that these benefits do not typically arise from programs having only one Black faculty member. In fact, the hiring of a single Black faculty member can inadvertently produce anemic diversity efforts by promoting a false sense of success. On a personal note, we have both enjoyed many benefits of comprising a critical mass of Black faculty. Our time as faculty in units employing multiple Black faculty members consistently produced thoughtful intellectual exchanges, contributing to a culture of increased research productivity and collegiality.

Academic units and their larger institutions should financially invest in future generations of Black scholars. Fortunately, since 2006, this work has been undertaken by the Racial Democracy Crime and Justice Network (RDCJN), founded by Ruth Peterson and Laurie Krivo.<sup>1</sup> The RDCJN, through its core focus on crime and justice research, promotes the professional development of early career scholars from underrepresented backgrounds. The Network also enhances junior scholars' professional skillsets in the hope of equipping them to successfully navigate challenges in obtaining tenure, confronting isolation in their home departments and universities, and managing unwieldy service demands from students, colleagues, and administrators. The RDCJN meets its goals through a yearly, three-week Summer Research Institute (SRI) for early career, tenure-track faculty; an annual summer research symposium; and professional development activities throughout the year on topics such as publishing, career planning, and negotiating the academy. To date, there are roughly 200 RDCJN members. Each year, eight individuals are selected for the SRI, thereby incrementally increasing the applicant pool of skillfully prepared Black scholars.

Furthermore, the formation of the American Society of Criminology's Division on People of Color and Crime (DPCC) also helped increase the visibility of Black scholars and other researchers of color. The DPCC provides opportunities for networking, mentoring, and exchanging ideas, thus potentially alleviating some of the isolation experienced by Black faculty members in primarily White institutions and departments. The DPCC's launch of its own journal, *Race and Justice*, further confirmed that Black scholars are making their mark on the discipline in spite of a wide range of obstacles described in this special issue.

In the end, making Black lives matter in criminology and criminal justice programs, as well as achieving a critical mass, requires an unfiltered reckoning of the fundamental issues that plague diversity efforts within the academy. Temporary or stop-gap measures aimed at appeasing a fuming audience do little to promote the professional development of Black scholars. Long-term solutions are the only hope. We believe that diversity and inclusion efforts, such as the RDCJN, grounded in best practices, supported by upper-level administration through funding and other resource allocation is necessary for meaningful progress.

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