

## **Disabled Inmates: Harmed, Victimized, and Forgotten**

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To be a disabled person of color in a time where state violence is rampant, and how ableism manifests in our criminal legal system are heavy burdens to live with each day. In my piece titled, "[Black America is Hurting and Tired. White America, Do You Even Care?](#)," I wrote about my own fears towards the police that intersect with my race and disability identities. To reflect on how unsafe I feel towards law enforcement and the realistic possibility of experiencing violence were sobering:

How do you expect me to feel as a Black disabled woman living in this country? I know that I already have a target on my front and my back due to my two main identities - Blackness and disability. If I am approached by a police officer, do I worry about whether this is a trigger-happy cop who hates Niggers or cripples?

What if I make a sharp move in my wheelchair in addressing them — will they deem that as an aggressive act, and a reason to empty half a clip in my 3 feet, 9 inch tall frame? Being someone who wears hearing aids (diagnosed as mild/moderate hard of hearing since the age of 13) and sometimes venture out without them, would an officer consider me to be non-compliant and disrespectful if I asked them to repeat a command because I did not hear them the first time? If there was no one around to videotape the exchange, what lies would be told about my refusal to follow command, and warrant killing me?

Which images, tweets, and Facebook statuses would be used to tell the world about who I am: the ones of me smiling, graduating from college and graduate school, meeting the President, and my public speaking engagements; or my rhetoric against white tears and racism to paint me as the stereotypical angry Black woman who could "terrorize" a white officer? I honestly never thought about these things until the past week, when we all wondering how we may be portrayed if we were to have a fatal encounter with the police.

My fears are the same shared amongst fellow Black deaf/disabled advocates, and other advocates across racial identities and disability types. Being of color, disabled, and a woman means that I have three "-isms" that those of authority can use against me to strip me of my humanness, dignity, and use as reasoning to violate my rights. Furthermore, to understand that these occurrences fail to garner public attention and swift consequences for perpetrators, whether they wear a badge or work for the prison, let's me know that my ability to seek justice if something were to happen to me is minimal. I would have expected this predicament in a time where disabled people and those of color had few legal protections; not in 2017 when we have mandates that are purposefully disregarded.

When we take a look at how disabled inmates are mistreated and victimized while incarcerated, it hits home for those of us who see ourselves in their stories. When I read case examples of inmates who are wheelchair users, of shorter stature (little people), and hard of hearing who wear hearing aids, I see myself in them. To know that I, and those I know, have a greater risk of

enduring violence and inexcusable failure to provide modified equipment and accommodations if incarcerated leaves a hard lump in my throat. How our criminal system even has the word “justice” attached to it when we unjustly target, dehumanize, and traumatize disabled inmates is beyond my level of comprehension. There is nothing “justly” or “fair” about the gross levels of abuse and ableism that are prevalent, nor can the silence and inaction to fix an undeniably broken system be tolerated.

The report, and further coverage, matters because we must do more to bring these injustices to the forefront - what disabled inmates experience are deplorable human and civil rights violations. The disparities faced by disabled inmates based on disability status, as well as intersections with other identities, cannot be ignored. We are literally dying, being revictimized, having our disabilities exacerbated and new ones created because of trauma and lack of accommodations provided, and being actively discriminated against when we are behind bars. What is taking place for thousands of inmates in our country is the silent epidemic America refuses to acknowledge, and we as disabled people are paying the price with our very bodies and lives.

To be a disabled person in this country is to know that the law may not be on your side, and that you are not entitled to receiving fair and equal justice, treatment, and access to necessary services and supports as non-disabled Americans. Being disabled means that you live and exist in a world with little regard for your presence; to be disabled and incarcerated makes that truth unapologetically known.