

# Erica Garner Died Of A Heart Attack. But It's Racism That's Killing Black Women.

BY [MELISSA HARRIS-PERRY](#) JAN 2, 2018



GETTY IMAGES

I have called, and texted, and talked to many black women over the past few days to understand why they have been deeply affected by the passing of Erica Garner. All share a deep despair for her two children who are losing their mother. All feel profound sadness for the family who still mourns the loss of Erica's father, Eric Garner, who died less than four years ago after New York Police Officer Daniel Pantaleo used a fatal chokehold during a July 2014 arrest for selling untaxed cigarettes. (Pantaleo was not indicted.) And there is a sting when such sorrow darkens the holidays.

Just below the sorrow for this 27-year-old daughter, mother, activist, and emerging voice of a generation, there is fury against a system that is implicated in her death.

But when I pushed, I found something else. About the death of Erica Garner there is more than sadness—there is rage. Just below the sorrow for this 27-year-old daughter, mother, activist, and emerging voice of a generation, there is fury against a system that is implicated in her death.

We are angry because Erica was unique, special, and wholly original, and because the burdens and vulnerabilities which likely contributed to her shockingly brief life expose deep and deadly inequalities facing black women as a group. The abrupt loss of Erica Garner is more than an individual tragedy; her death, like her father's, is a public lesson in American inequality wrought on a fragile human body for all of us to see. For Erica, there is no video and no villain, but Erica Garner's story matters all the same.

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## The Stress of the System

We are angry because Erica Garner was not born into a fair system. Even though she was born a full quarter-century after the victories of the Civil Rights movement and lived

most of her adulthood during the administration of the first black president, Erica's life opportunities were determined from the moment of her birth by her race, gender, and zip code. Being born a black girl meant Erica Garner was far more likely than her white counterparts to have a family marked by the American corrections system. In this country 6% of white men have connections to family members in prison, but 44% of black women are connected to imprisoned family members. Erica's father was killed by police in 2014, but he had been arrested by the NYPD more than thirty times since 1980. In Matt Taibbi's *I Can't Breathe, A Killing on Bay Street*, he shows that Garner was one of thousands of black men ensnared by purposive efforts to target specific blocks and bodies for heavy surveillance, aggressive practices, and racially biased outcomes based on a misguided theory of policing. For NYPD Commissioner Bill Bratton and Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Erica's father was little more than a "broken window" who needed to be scrutinized and vigorously patrolled for petty offenses so as to deter more dangerous criminal activity. There's little evidence to support the broken windows policing theory, but there is substantial evidence detailing the social, psychological and economic costs of mass incarceration and criminalization endured by black women and families.

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We are angry because when black men are harassed and arrested, it is black women and children who bear the cost of fines, bail, lawyers, and lost wages. The Prison Policy Initiative found that families spend \$1 billion a year just trying to stay in phone contact with jailed loved ones. Black women pay a hefty price when men, marked with criminal records find it harder to find work, to pay for education, to secure housing, or to contribute to child support and care. A 2016 study conducted by the Scholars Strategy Network found that “[black women] disproportionately experience the spillover effects harmful to health and social and economic wellbeing,” adding that “far too many black women in the United States must struggle with the economic deficits and stresses caused by the imprisonment of loved ones.”

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For Erica Garner, those stresses increased when her father was felled by a police chokehold. Indeed the insight of academic researchers about black women’s burden as they navigate the criminal justice system on behalf of their loved ones was eerily familiar to an insight Chaédria LaBouvier offered about Erica Garner in her March 2016 profile for ELLE.com There, LaBouvier wrote,

*The intensity of her life as an activist and a symbol of her father and all that it implies is something that doesn't really resonate with her—until it does. When I ask her what her day is like, she replies, "Normal." But surely, it's not, right? Most people aren't campaigning for a presidential candidate and creating nonprofits to address police brutality, especially the average 25-year-old....*

*Garner seems to possess a heightened awareness of how the world sees her—as a large black woman who answers a question brusquely and is perceived as "angry," rather than as young, hurting, and vulnerable. Throughout our conversations, she vacillates between the aggressive fearlessness of a young black woman who knows she can't depend on the world to protect her and the vulnerability of a young black woman who acknowledges how unprotected she is.*

LaBouvier records the vulnerability of Erica Garner as barely-woman, daddy's girl who has lost so much. She sees in her what scholars have marked for black women as a group.

## The Stress of Activism

We are angry because we know Erica Garner's activism may have been hard on her mind and body as well. Research shows even though they feel called to the work, political activism may exacerbate stress and anxiety in young black adults. In 2016, the well known and loved 23-year-old Black Lives Matter organizer MarShawn McCarrel committed suicide in Ohio. Just over a year later, in May 2017, Ferguson protestor Edward Crawford, whose photo became a visually iconic marker of the resistance, took his own life. In the wake of their deaths many young people engaged in the movement for black lives reflected on the serious mental health issues they regularly encounter in the work of organizing.

If she had moments when the political work seemed like too much to bear, then surely Erica was like so many other young black folk whose activism exacts an enormous cost.

We are angry because we suspect Erica was forced to carry burdens too heavy for her to bear. In final days of her life, friends and family managed her Twitter account to provide updates on her health. In the hours after her death, they used the account to indicate they would only give official comments to black journalists and when criticized, they responded, "which one of those people were with her last night, this morning, the day before, which one of those people was with her on Christmas or did she call when she felt suicidal ...." The post was sent in a moment of grief. It opened a window just slightly,

allowing us to know something of the agony and despair Erica may have sometimes felt. If she had moments when the political work seemed like too much to bear, then surely Erica was like so many other young black folk whose activism exacts an enormous cost. Despite those costs, Erica found purpose in her commitment to social justice activism. Still, it's painful to know how much it demanded of her.

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## The Stress of Pregnancy

We are angry because Erica was the mother of two children including a four-month-old son she named for her late father, and it is not safe for black women to be pregnant. Black pregnant women are nearly four times more likely than white women to die from pregnancy-related complications. In New York City, where Erica Garner lived and where she died less than 6 months after giving birth to her second child, black women are 12 times more likely than white women to die of pregnancy-related causes. Black women are more than twice as likely as white women to experience preterm birth and more than three times more likely to give birth to low birth weight infants. Babies born to black women are more than twice as likely to die before their first birthday as babies born to white women. None of these disparities improve when we account for socioeconomic status, health insurance, or even alcohol and tobacco use. Indeed, the gap is wider between black and white women with higher income and educational attainment.

According to decades of medical research, this happens to black mothers and their babies because of the physical stress of racism. And it is not just experiences of racial discrimination during pregnancy, data shows “birth outcomes are influenced by events and experiences that occur prior to pregnancy.” When we are called the n-word for the first time in 3rd grade, or when our college roommate jabs us with micro-aggressions through freshman year, or our co-workers insist on touching our hair, our bodies store stress hormones that seem to poison our future babies. As if our bodies are telling them, it is not safe here.

It has not been safe for black women to be pregnant. Black pregnancy in America has meant pain, loss, rupture, death, pathology, sadness, grief, and the loss of control. The depth of this racial inequity is so profound it is literally killing black mamas and babies. We are angry and sad because we know it may have been part of what killed Erica.

I can't breathe. I can't breathe. I can't breathe. The truth of Eric Garner's final words repeatedly ignored until he was gone is not just an individual truth; it is also a collective one. The video of his final minutes allowed many to bear witness to a shared racial experience of being harassed, choked, and disbelieved by powerful forces that cared little for your black life. Many black communities were crying out that they were cut off from clean air, affordable housing, quality education, equal opportunity and that without this oxygen they could not breathe. Eric Garner's death was individually tragic and collectively enraging. His death mattered because he was human and his death mattered because it captured a meaningful social death experienced by whole communities. The same is true for his daughter. She matters as a person, a woman, a mother, a daughter, an activist who had so much more to give. And she matters because her death reveals to us so many of the burdens carried by black women and girls as they navigate unequal systems in the American state.

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As editor-at-large, Melissa Harris-Perry acts as a guide to the stories, experiences, challenges, policies, and defining pop culture moments of women and girls of color.

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