

Statement (United States): Justice for Tyre Nichols! Solidarity against police murder!

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The Tempest editorial board and the Tempest Collective stand in solidarity with the family and communities of Tyre Nichols, who was murdered by police on January 7, 2023.

The horrifying video released Friday showing five Memphis police officers severely beating a defenseless and compliant Tyre Nichols, a 29-year-old Black man, on January 7 has once again exposed the brutal racism of police murder.

We at *Tempest* stand with his family and the communities impacted by his death. We are in solidarity with the ongoing movement for Black Lives against racist killer cops.

Nichols' murder comes in the wake of a record year of police killings. The *Guardian* [reports](#) that in 2022, law enforcement killed at least 1,176 people—roughly 100 people per month. Most of those killings—more than 70 percent—occurred during routine, non-threatening police encounters. In more than 30 percent of cases, the person killed was fleeing for their life—as was the case with Nichols. While making up only 13 percent of the U.S. population, Black people constituted 24 percent of those killed by police. Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people.

Like every person murdered by police, however, Tyre Nichols was much more than another name, more than another statistic. He was a father to a four-year-old son and a FedEx worker. His mother, Row Vaughn Wells, was extremely close to her son. He had moved from Sacramento to Memphis to be near her, they shared a home there with his stepfather, and he had a tattoo of her name on his arm. He enjoyed skateboarding and photography. (You can find some of his work [here](#).) NPR [published](#) a video—a beautiful and heartbreaking counterpoint to the police video—of Nichols riding a skateboard in the sunshine, jumping stairs, curbs, and walls while making elaborate turns.

On the night of January 7, police pulled Nichols over and dragged him violently from his car. All five police officers at the scene weighed over 200 pounds in comparison to Nichols, who, despite his considerable height of 6'3", weighed less than 150 pounds. (He was living with Crohn's disease.) Nichols fled on foot toward his mother's house after the police Tasered him. Police caught him and threw him to the ground even as he protested that he was complying with their orders to lie down. Crying for his mother, he was kicked, punched, and beaten with a baton until he was bleeding, immobile, and in shock.

Emergency workers were slow to arrive. The *New York Times* [reports](#) that medics stood by passively and even walked away as Nichols writhed in pain for six minutes and 40 seconds. [23 minutes passed](#) before a stretcher arrived on the scene. Nichols died in the hospital three days later.

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Protests [have erupted](#) across the country, in Memphis, Milwaukee, Oakland, Phoenix, Baltimore, Dallas, Los Angeles, York, Atlanta, Boston, San Francisco, Portland, and elsewhere. Everywhere, protesters have raised signs and chants calling for not only an end to police killings but also for the defunding and abolition of the police.

Ironically—but not surprisingly—police in riot gear [faced off](#) Friday night with protestors in Los Angeles. They were honoring not only Nichols but also [Keenan Anderson](#), who was murdered this month after L.A. police pinned him to the ground and Tasered him at least six times over a period of 42 seconds.

The five officers who murdered Tyre Nichols have been fired and charged with second-degree murder, along with six other felonies, and a [sixth officer](#) has also been suspended. The emergency medical workers who delayed care for Nichols have been suspended.

The cops who beat Tyre Nichols were members of a predatory strike team called Street Crimes Operation to Restore Peace in our Neighborhoods, or SCORPION, which has since been dismantled. Such task forces, modeled on the 1970s STRESS (Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) unit in Detroit, are deployed to intensify the crackdown on Black people and the poor to assuage the anxieties of business owners and justify inequality.

All of the officers who beat Tyre Nichols are Black, which might explain the rapidity with which they were dismissed and charged and the sudden disbanding of the task force. One can imagine that, if the officers had been white, they might not have faced such sudden—or any—punishment.

The situation is not one in which a few “bad cops” are out of control. SCORPION was created on the [initiative](#) of police chief Cerlyn Davis, who instructed the unit to crack down even on minor offenses and ramp up “all-out” policing in poor neighborhoods.

Even when police forces are racially diverse, they still fulfill the functions of surveilling, targeting, and killing of Black people. The scapegoating and murder of Black men by police buttresses an inhumane set of priorities by which police funding increases while resources for public welfare are cut. The brutal racism of policing in U.S. cities justifies inequality and austerity as we enter a likely economic recession.

The 2020 murder of George Floyd led to mass uprisings for racial justice and against police murder. Yet, with the backing of pro-cop Democratic mayors, police budgets across the country have increased, including in Los Angeles, where the police department funding has increased by \$250 million since 2020. In New York City, Mayor Eric Adams is [pushing](#) to [reduce](#) city spending by three percent in 2023 and 4.75 percent in 2024 and 2025. Adams’ plan would [shrink the expansion](#) of free preschool programs across the city in order to save \$284 million in fiscal years 2025 and 2026.

Amid the local protests in Memphis following George Floyd’s murder in 2020, Democratic mayor Jim Strickland released a [statement](#) on June 10 that read in part, “I’m opposed to defunding our police

department. I believe cutting funding from the Memphis Police Department is unwise. And frankly, it's out of touch with the majority of city residents." In 2017, the Memphis police [budget](#) was 38 percent of the total city budget; a year after George Floyd's murder, it was 40 percent.

This inhumane set of priorities is evident in another instance of police murder. On January 18, police shot and killed a nonviolent protester in Atlanta, Georgia, queer environmentalist [Manuel "Tortuguita" Esteban Paez Terán](#). Terán and other activists were challenging what is being called "[Cop City](#)," officials plan to build a 90-million-dollar police training center there, destroying 85 acres of forest.

This is the context of the police murder of Tyre Nichols, who died on January 10. Just ten days later, President Biden made the following tellingly reactionary [comments](#):

When it comes to public safety—when it comes to public safety, we know the answer is not to defund the police. It's to retrain some police. It's to make sure we know exactly what's happening. But it's not to defund the police. They need more funding, and they need ancillary help as well.

Calling for more police funding, Biden has proposed an "American Rescue Plan" that includes \$350 billion to local and state governments "to make communities safer." In a [sickening move](#), Biden invited Nichols' family to the State of the Union Address.

This "plan" and Biden's remarks are affronts to justice and decency. The police murder of Tyre Nichols—and that of Keenan Anderson and the hundreds of other Black people killed by the police—requires a renewed uprising against racist police murders. Bianca Austin, aunt of police victim Breonna Taylor, [expressed](#) this urgency: "It just never stops. There was a movement and uproar across the globe, and we're still having more killings."

None of the issues raised by the 2020 rebellion against police murder has been resolved. Derecka Parnell, [writing](#) for the *Guardian*, notes that the beating of Tyre Nichols happened even when reforms like body cameras were in place.

There is an urgent need for ongoing protests raising the demand to defund—and, ultimately, abolish—the police. In response to the video of police beating Nichols, a Portland activist posted a [message](#) reading, "EVERY SINGLE MURDER caused by police should ignite within us a rage that is unstoppable. This will ignite a whole new uprising. And it should."

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You can support Nichols' family by donating to the [Tyre Nichols Memorial Fund](#).

P.S.

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