

4 Questions to Ask Yourself Before Calling the Police on a Black Person

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- By: [Kevin Mathews](#)
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Looking at several incidents in the past month alone, it's become increasingly obvious that white people think it's acceptable to call the police on black people over some simple and stupid things like napping, barbecuing, moving into an apartment and golfing too slowly. Summoning the police over nothing amounts to harassment, and it comes from a place of prejudice.

In order to curb some of these calls, I'd like to suggest a few questions you can ask yourself the next time you're tempted to call the police to report a black person:

1. COULD THERE BE A PERFECTLY REASONABLE EXPLANATION FOR WHAT'S GOING ON?

In so many of the examples we've seen in the past month, the white people calling the police are assigning criminal intent to innocuous actions.

Before calling the police, stop and reflect on whether what you're seeing is plainly a crime or just something that you're worried could be a crime. If it's just as easy to invent a story where what you're witnessing is someone doing something completely lawful as it would be for something unlawful, extend the benefit of the doubt.

After all, you wouldn't want the police to come and detain you when you're doing something totally normal because someone thought you might be up to no good.

2. WOULD I FIND IT SUSPICIOUS IF I SAW A WHITE PERSON DOING THIS SAME THING?

Most people don't like to admit that they have biases, but pretty much all of us do. Be aware that we live in a racist society where our institutions and media reinforce some bigoted notions. As a result, you may impulsively make a negative judgment about a person of color even if you don't consciously want to.

You may not have total control over these snap assumptions, but you do have control over your subsequent actions. It's a choice to give into that fear and hold on to the thought that your prejudicial thoughts are somehow legitimate.

Before dialing 911, give yourself a test: would you still believe that police intervention is necessary if the person you're reporting were Caucasian? Not everyone is going to be prepared to be that honest with his or herself, but if you even have a moment of hesitation from this question, just put the phone down.

3. IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO ADDRESS THE SITUATION?

So often, it seems like the police are contacted because the callers are too afraid to talk to the black person themselves. The mere fact that you don't want to initiate a conversation with this person should already be a clue that your personal biases are influencing how you look at the situation.

So ask yourself—is there a pressing reason that the police need to be involved at all? If someone is loitering in your business or seemingly trespassing on your property (and you swear you'd have the same issue if a white person were doing the same) why not start by calmly expressing your concerns first before calling and/or threatening to call the police?

In initiating a conversation, you may discover that it's all a misunderstanding, or you may find that the other party is totally reasonable about your concern. It'd be silly to waste some officers' time for a situation that never required the presence of law enforcement.

4. IS THE CALL WORTH ENDANGERING THIS PERSON'S LIFE OVER?

It's no secret that African Americans are the victims of police brutality at much higher rates than any other race. Whether consciously or unconsciously, a lot of officers view black people as inherently more threatening, which means batons are brandished and shots are fired in situations where it shouldn't be necessary. A cop can mistake a cell phone for a weapon and suddenly an unarmed individual is senselessly dead.

Considering all of the sad stories we've seen in recent years, it's got to be worth asking if bringing the police in is worth putting the individual's health at risk. In the event that the interaction with the police escalates to violence, are you going to feel good knowing that you set the wheels in motion over something so trivial?

Heck, even you're confident that a petty crime is being committed (something serious/dangerous is obviously a different story,) you may want to think twice about calling in the cops given the potential risks.

Admittedly, the people who need this sort of reflection the most are the people who are least likely to read an article like this one. Nevertheless, in light of all the recent silly 911 calls, it's clear that we've got a long way to go toward treating our African American neighbors with respect and equality.

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