

Should I call the cops?

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SHOULD I CALL THE COPS?

1. Is my or someone else's life in imminent danger?
2. One more time, am I absolutely certain the situation is life threatening?
3. If the people involved were white, would I still call the police?
4. Is there anyone else I can call or any other resources available to address the situation?

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Four young Black boys who were playing in a Minnesota park this week had guns drawn on them, were handcuffed and tossed in the back of a squad car after being the victims of a racial attack by an older White teenage boy.

The White boy was wielding a knife and a garbage can lid at them while hurling the n-word. Then the boy's girlfriend called 911 to make a false report.

The responding officers arrived assuming it was true and reportedly jumped out of their vehicle waving their guns, terrifying both the boys and nearby children of a family who had tried to come to their aid.

The White boy and his girlfriend were long gone by the time the racial terror they unleashed on these boys began. A good samaritan who had seen the earlier altercation prior to the police arrival had the good sense to let the camera roll. Brianna Lindell describes the incident and the scene in the video: children, handcuffed sitting in front of a police car, one of them begging for the police to let him put his shirt on because he's being 'eaten alive' by mosquitoes. The footage is beyond disturbing. My nephew is almost their age and imagining the panic he would feel bring tears to my eyes and makes my blood boil with rage for what these boys endured.

About halfway through the video, Lindell wonders with another woman off-camera why the police showed up in the first place, guessing accurately that it was the aggressor who called 911.

"That's what White people do now," she says. "They use the cops as their own personal service."

Three months ago, when we first published this letter and guide to White people about calling the cops, the need for this conversation was already dire. It does feel like there is a shift happening, more people are aware of the problem and pulling out their camera to document these abuses, but we have to push further and start having real talk about police divestment and how that can actually make all of our communities safer. That's why we launched Should I Call The Cops? to track these stories, their outcomes and explore solutions to this epidemic with grave consequences.

Today the case of Emmett Till was officially reopened, one of our very first well-known examples of what happens when White people make false claims against Black youth. We cannot let that continue. Here again is Should I Call The Cops?

To my White sisters and brothers,

We've got to make some changes. While we do the work to end institutional and structural racism in the long-term, there are things we need to do in the day-to-day to make sure our actions and reactions aren't hurting people. This last week we've seen Black men arrested in Starbucks and another young Black man was shot and killed in a Walmart parking lot. We can't overnight stop cops from shooting people, but there's a real and practical solution that can save a life: stop being so quick to involve the police in non-emergent situations. There are literally no consequences when a white person calls the cops and an unarmed Black person gets killed or arrested. So I've written this short list of questions to ask yourself the next time you feel the urge to call 911.

1. Is my or someone else's life in imminent danger?

Have you just witnessed a car accident and someone is injured? Is someone actively shooting a gun that you can see with your own eyes? Do you smell or see smoke from a burning fire? Yes, of course, call 911. Wake up those fire trucks and ambulances! Keep in mind, response times can be slow in neighborhoods that are predominantly people of color, so folks have created alternative emergency solutions, some of which can be found here.

2. One more time, am I absolutely certain that the situation is life threatening?

If someone is sitting in Starbucks talking with a friend, there is almost zero chance that your or anyone else's lives are in danger. If you have any doubts, just go ask. If someone isn't waving a weapon [and please try to be absolutely certain that what you see is in fact a weapon, not a cell phone, CDs or a pack of Skittles], there's no reason not to approach someone. If there is any part of you that thinks the situation is not grave, go talk to people. Express your concern calmly and rationally. Ask if they are okay and need help. Ask them if they want or need you to call the police before you do. If you have a dispute with someone, see if you can bring someone nearby in to help mediate. Most disputes don't need police involvement to be resolved.

3. If the people that are involved were white, would I still call the police?

This one is really critical. Taking that extra ten seconds to check your bias can save a life. No one is calling you racist for having unconscious bias from the things you were taught by your friends and family and what you see in the news. But if you don't make that effort to evaluate whether your instincts are based in reality, then you become complicit to a racist criminal justice system that unfairly targets people of color. Going back to the Starbucks example, two white men are sitting at a table conversing without a coffee in hand, what are the chances you would call the police to intervene?

I remember being on a date with a guy walking down Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. It was getting dark and there was an elderly Black man with a cane walking towards us. My date got visibly nervous and mumbled something about us getting out of the way and steered to the opposite side of the sidewalk. As we crossed paths, I smiled at the gentleman and said hello. He returned the gesture. After he was out of earshot, I looked at my date and asked, "What's wrong with you? Are you afraid of Black people?" He got defensive saying something about how dangerous it was after dark in downtown Cleveland where he was from. I made a mistake and missed an opportunity. Instead of incredulously asking him if he was afraid of Black people, I should have asked him if that was an old white man coming towards us, would you have been afraid? So next time you're in a situation where you feel like someone or something looks suspicious, imagine the person is white and then ask yourself whether you would respond the same.

4. Is there anyone else I can call or any other resources available to address the situation?

Calling 911 should always be a last resort. Program numbers of local mental health centers in your phone for situations where a person is behaving erratically in public, yelling at people, waving arms in the air, something along those lines. Exhaust all other avenues before resorting to calling the police, programming numbers of crisis intervention organizations and hotlines into your phone.

By all means, if there is gushing blood or flames, dial 911. But don't default to the police if you are just uncomfortable. People are being harassed. People are dying. We can't force every police department around the country to have mandatory and ongoing bias training tomorrow. But we can take the simple but profound step to thinking twice before calling the cops.

It's also important to educate ourselves. Understand the ramifications of calling the police in a non-emergency situation. You can't assume that if the person didn't do anything wrong, then the police won't bother them. We've seen that go wrong over and over. Dr. Jason Johnson wrote this week about the deadly consequences there are when white people call the cops on Black people. Here's an excerpt:

As a black man in America who has been harassed by police more times than I can count, I wasn't surprised by the viral Starbucks video at all. However, my anger is directed not just at the cops but also at the cowardly Starbucks manager who made the call to the police to begin with. The men and women making these outrageous and unwarranted calls to police, which result in the harassment, unfair prosecution and even death of people of color, need to be found, publicly shamed and prosecuted to the full extent that the law allows.

No, I'm not talking about Dave Reiling, the man who reported an actual crime in Sacramento, Calif., that the police used as an excuse to shoot Stephon Clark in his own backyard. Calling the police to report an actual crime that the police overact to is not the citizen's fault, no matter what color he or she is. I'm talking about the hundreds of cases—that we know about—every year, where white Americans actively and knowingly use the police as an extension of their personal bigotry yet face no consequences.

I'm talking about the white woman at the Red Roof Inn outside of Pittsburgh who called the cops on me because I disputed the charges on my bill and asked to speak to a manager. I'm talking about the white woman who called the cops on me last year even though she knew I was walking with political canvassers for Jon Ossoff's congressional campaign in North Atlanta. I'm talking about the police officer who followed me behind my house in Hiram, Ohio, asking where I lived because he'd "gotten some calls about robberies."

In each and every single one of these instances, a white person used the cops as his or her personal racism valets, and I was the one getting served. In each of these instances, I could have been arrested, beaten up or worse based on nothing more than the word of a white person whom I made uncomfortable. As sick as this all is, I still consider myself lucky.

Tamir Rice was killed at the tender age of 12 because a man who admitted to spending the afternoon drinking called 911 to report a "juvenile" who was probably carrying a "fake" gun. Constance Hollinger, the 911 dispatcher, who failed to deliver that information to the cops, got an eight-day suspension but kept her job, and there was no investigation into the caller. Tamir is still dead.

Then there's Ronald T. Ritchie, who told 911 that John Crawford III was running around Walmart "menacing children" with a shotgun. Crawford, holding a BB gun—sold at Walmart—in the open carry state of Ohio, was shot and killed by police. Despite clear evidence that Ritchie lied to the 911 dispatcher, which is a crime, no charges were filed against him.

You can get arrested for pulling a fire alarm, making fake bomb threats and making false claims of an alien invasion—why not a false police report that results in death? We should be pushing for prosecution against these callers just as much as the cops who pull the trigger.

That's why I knew Starbucks CEO Kevin Johnson's statement on the Philadelphia incident was trash: "Our store manager never intended for these men to be arrested and this should never have escalated the way it did ..."

Read more [here](#).