

# The Obama Presidency and Race Relations

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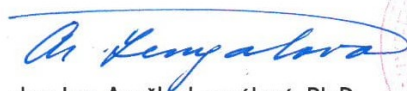
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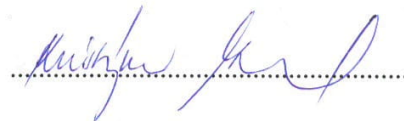
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## **ABSTRAKT**

Cílem této bakalářské práce je hlubší nahlédnutí do problematiky prezidentství Baracka Obamy a jeho vlivu na rasové vztahy ve společnosti. Barack Obama byl zvolen do funkce prezidenta Spojených Států v roce 2008 a jeho zvolení bylo příslibem naděje na zlepšení rasových vztahů. Obamova vize o překonání rasových rozdílů a vytvoření “dokonalejší unie” měla ovšem zcela opačný dopad a rasové vztahy ve Spojených Státech byly během Obamovy éry rozpolcenější více než kdy předtím. Tato bakalářská práce se bude zabývat faktory, které měly vliv na zhoršení rasových vztahů ve společnosti a které v konečném důsledku vedly k vytvoření společnosti, ve které ani prezident tmavé pleti nepomohl k překlenutí rasových nerovností.

Klíčová slova: Spojené Státy, Afro-Američané, černoši, běloši, Barack Obama, rasa, rasismus, rasové nepokoje, rasové nerovnosti

## **ABSTRACT**

This bachelor's thesis documents issues regarding Barack Obama's presidency and its impact on race relations in American society. Obama was elected president of the United States in 2008, and his election was a sign of hope for an improvement in race relations. Yet, Obama's vision of bridging racial divides and creating “a more perfect union” had a completely opposite effect, as race relations actually worsened during his presidency. This thesis identifies and analyzes factors that resulted in worsening race relations and ultimately led to problems that not even a mixed-race president could solve.

Keywords: United States, African-Americans, blacks, whites, Barack Obama, race, racism, race riots, racial inequalities

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I hereby declare that the print version of my bachelor's thesis and the electronic version of my thesis deposited in the IS/STAG system are identical.

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## INTRODUCTION

“Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time. We are the ones we’ve been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.”<sup>1</sup> The race relations in the United States have always been tense and complicated and many historical racially-oriented events still reflect the racial worldview and shape people’s behaviour. Most Americans believe that “race fundamentally defines America and is a dividing line drawn in blood through the nation’s moral map.”<sup>2</sup> When Barack Obama as a non-white was elected a president, many American citizens believed that America can move forward and race relations will be improved under Obama.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, a black president represented a chance to increase the number of leaders and their political power to defend rights of minorities and people of colour.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis documents the development of racial inequalities, the influence of Barack Obama as a president on the race relations in society, his vision of a post-racial union, and the results of his presidency on the overall progress in race relations. This thesis portrays certain events of Obama’s presidency that provoked race riots and increased race tension in America. It will be argued that Obama, although perceived as symbol of post-racial society, caused that racial inequalities and race relations worsened and that he left America’s society even more divided.

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<sup>1</sup> Ronnie Cho, “How to Make Change: From Idea to Action,” *White House*, February 28, 2012, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/02/28/how-make-change-idea-action>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Eric Dyson, *The Black Presidency: Barack Obama and the Politics of Race in America* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016), IX.

<sup>3</sup> Steve Chapman, “How Race Relations Got Worse,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 29, 2016, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chapman/ct-racism-america-hillary-trump-obama-chapman-perspec-0731-md-20160729-column.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Larry J. Walker, F. Erik Brooks, and Ramon B. Goings, eds., *How the Obama Presidency Changed the Political Landscape* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2017), 3.

## 1 RACIAL INEQUALITY IN THE UNITED STATES

This year, the United States remembers the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. King was a civil rights activist who fought against certain racial inequalities that, unfortunately, still persist in America. One of the biggest issues that America faces is health care availability. For many years, blacks had insufficient health care, and many were refused treatment altogether. This is highly connected with life expectancy, which is generally much lower for blacks than for whites. One of the explanations might be that health insurance and health care is expensive, and cost prohibitive for the impoverished.<sup>5</sup> Racial economic inequality is another problem. According to 2016 data from the Economic Policy Institute, "the median black worker earned 75 percent of what the median white worker earned in an hour and the median black household earned 61 percent of the income the median white household earned in a year." Insufficient money can also result in families not being allowed to buy a house or other property or save money for retirement.<sup>6</sup> Racial disparities occur in education as well. According to a survey of the Education Department involving more than fifty million students during the 2013-2014 school year, black and Hispanic students are not on the same level as their classmates. Many non-white high-school students are absent from school too much, which can possibly result in their dropping out. Black students are also more likely to be suspended from school. Another fact is also that many black, Hispanic and Asian students are more likely to attend a school, which has police officers but no counsellors. And these officers arrest two times more black students than whites. One of the most alarming facts emerging from the report is that black and Latino students had to attend schools in which some of the teachers were not fully qualified or were in their first year of practise.<sup>7</sup> And last but not least, one of the biggest issues in America is crime and the justice system, which is described in the following chapters.

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<sup>5</sup> Vijay Das and Adam Gaffney, "Racial Injustice Still Rife in Health Care," *CNN*, updated July 28, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/07/28/opinions/das-gaffney-racial-injustice-health-care/index.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Valerie Wilson, "Racial Inequalities in Wages, Income, and Wealth Show that MLK's Work Remains Unfinished," *Economic Policy Institute*, January 11, 2018, <https://www.epi.org/publication/racial-inequalities-in-wages-income-and-wealth-show-that-mlks-work-remains-unfinished/>.

<sup>7</sup> Saeed Ahmed, "Racial Disparities Persist in US. Schools, Study Finds," *CNN*, updated June 7, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/06/07/health/schools-disparity-education-study/index.html>.

## 2 OBAMA'S VISION OF A MORE PERFECT UNION

Before Obama became a president of the United States, he delivered only one speech regarding race. His March 2008 "A More Perfect Union" speech in Philadelphia was his most persuasive expression of "his vision of the role of race and racial history in American society." Obama emphasized the role of race in American history and outlined the possible ways to improve racial relations in the United States. Obama's speech was not primarily intended to give his opinion on racial relations,<sup>8</sup> but was rather a response to specific statements by Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, who criticised the government for not acting fairly to people of colour.<sup>9</sup> This speech, which was written by Obama himself, was reportedly "the most watched event of the 2008 campaign."<sup>10</sup>

"We the people, in order to form a more perfect union." Obama started his speech with this particular quotation coming from the preamble to the US Constitution. Obama continued the speech with a remark on the history of race in America, from the Founding Fathers and slavery to the racial issues of the twenty-first century. He pointed out that one of his goals was "to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America," adding that Americans might be different but they all need to move towards a better future together. He also mentioned his own racial origins and the way they influenced his life, emphasizing that he comes from a white mother and black father and that his wife has "the blood of slaves and slave-owners" running in her body. Obama also mentioned that there had been repeated negative comments on his racial origins, meaning that for some people he was too black, while for others he was not black enough to be president.<sup>11</sup>

In another part of the speech he focused his attention on reasons that resulted in racial inequalities in America. Obama pointed out that the bases of all racial issues come from the past, listing segregated schools, the Brown vs. Board of Education case, legalized discrimination – meaning the racial discrimination against blacks regarding business, home ownerships or employment. He pointed out that "a lack of economic opportunity among black men and lack of basic services all helped to create a cycle of violence, blight and neglect that continue to haunt us." He expressed the impossibility of totally changing race

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<sup>8</sup> Melanye T. Price, *The Race Whisperer: Barack Obama and the Political Uses of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 106.

<sup>9</sup> G. Reginald Daniel and Hettie V. Williams, eds., *Race and the Obama Phenomenon: The Vision of a More Perfect Multiracial Union* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 311.

<sup>10</sup> Price, *The Race Whisperer*, 106.

<sup>11</sup> "Barack Obama's Race Speech at the Constitution Center," National Constitution Center, accessed March 30, 2018, [https://constitutioncenter.org/amoreperfectunion/docs/Race\\_Speech\\_Transcript.pdf](https://constitutioncenter.org/amoreperfectunion/docs/Race_Speech_Transcript.pdf).

relations during his presidency, but he believed that if people work together, and work hard, it is possible to “move beyond some of our old racial wounds, and that in fact we have no choice is we are to continue on the path of a more perfect union,” meaning specifically for blacks to take history into account, but not to become a prey of the past. He emphasized it is important to fight for improvements in education, health care and jobs. Obama stated that America has made certain progress in race relations, stating that “what we have already achieved gives us hope – the audacity of hope – for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.” He emphasized the fact that change needs to come now, because education is ineffective, and the health care is insufficient for all.<sup>12</sup>

In the last part of his speech, Obama stated that he would have never run for president if he did not believe that the change and the vision of “a more perfect union” can be achieved. He expressed his belief in young people, “whose attitudes and beliefs and openness to change have already made history in this election.”<sup>13</sup> Finally, he shared his own personal story of racial unity from his own presidential campaign. This personal story, as well as the whole speech, resulted in nationwide reactions and remarks. Obama’s supporters considered this speech a highlight of the campaign, while his opponents were mocking it. Either way, this speech was highly regarded as an essential part of the campaign and one of the reasons Obama won the election.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> “Barack Obama’s Race Speech at the Constitution Center.”

<sup>13</sup> “Barack Obama’s Race Speech at the Constitution Center.”

<sup>14</sup> Price, *The Race Whisperer*, 107.

### 3 RACE RIOTS DURING THE OBAMA ADMINISTRATION

Obama's election as president signalled a new era of racism to many. According to some, an election of a black man to the presidency meant a progressive change for race relations. Moreover, it was said that America was heading into a post-racial era. Obama's election brought hope to millions.<sup>15</sup> According to one survey, about 80 percent of African-Americans considered his election as "a dream come true" and 96 per cent believed that race relations under Obama would be improved. Some said Obama's presidency was overestimated, even though the election of a black man is symbolic and represents a certain way of change.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the optimistic visions and hopes, Obama's election resulted in many racially oriented protests in the following weeks. Fights erupted on many university campuses across America, and the term "Obama assassination" became one of the most searched phrases on the Internet.<sup>17</sup> But this was just the beginning. The Obama presidency was marred by race riots and the deaths of blacks at the hands of law enforcement. These protests led to the birth of several activist groups fighting for justice, most significantly Black Lives Matter, which claimed that "the U.S. criminal justice system represents a gateway to racial oppression."<sup>18</sup> The following subchapters look into the most significant race incidents more deeply, focusing especially on their societal impact.

#### 3.1 Locke High School riot

One of the first riots under the Obama presidency, which attracted public attention, occurred at Locke High School on May 9, 2008 in Los Angeles, California. Locke High School is known as one of the most problematic schools in South Los Angeles, but the fight which broke out on that day was different.<sup>19</sup> More than six hundred students,

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<sup>15</sup> Martell Teasley and David Ikard, "Barack Obama and the Politics of Race: The Myth of Post racism in America," *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no.3 (January 2010): 411, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40648599>.

<sup>16</sup> Teasley and Ikard, "Barack Obama and the Politics of Race," 418.

<sup>17</sup> Orlando Patterson, "Will Obama's Election Usher in a New Era of Race Relations? Let's Have a Close Look," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 62 (Winter 2008/2009): 35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40407356>.

<sup>18</sup> Peniel Joseph, "Obama's Effort to Heal Racial Divisions and Uplift Black America," *Washington Post*, April 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/obama-legacy/racism-during-presidency.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Fields-Meyers, "Black vs. Brown at LA School," *Time*, May 15, 2008, <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1806968,00.html>.

including black and Hispanic gangs, started to fistfight and brawl until the police established order using batons.<sup>20</sup>

Locke High School is located in the same neighbourhood where the 1965 Watts Riots took place, therefore Principal Travis Kiel did not hesitate to call the police. Within a few minutes, police burst into the school, separated black and Latino students into different parts of the school and arrested three students for fighting and one nonstudent suspected of possessing a knife.<sup>21</sup> Some other students got injured and had to receive medical treatment.<sup>22</sup>

According to half of the students, the riot was definitely racially motivated, emerging from a quarrel between local gangs of so-called “taggers”. On the other hand, the rest of the students thought it was not about racism, but about personal problems. However, there might have been one more impulse for the conflict. Locke High School was supposed to come under a private non-profit, and students felt anxious about new policies.<sup>23</sup>

A few weeks after this incident happened, students and teachers wanted to show that they do care about one another, and therefore black and Latino students united and stood up against the politics of divide and rule practised not only by all kinds of media, but also the police and other officials. Some of the teachers spoke about the history that blacks and Latinos have in common, especially about the U.S. slavery era, the importance of the unity between these two communities and about the persecution and oppression these two groups have to face in everyday life. This school assembly, as well as the preceding fight, again brought the issue of immigration and racism into the open, and there have been many debates concerning if and how to resolve problems between blacks and Latinos.

Racism is a significant and vital issue on school campuses in Los Angeles, and the conflicts between blacks and Latinos do not come out of the blue, but presumably are rooted in still persisting tensions in the neighbourhoods and among particular gangs. What makes these struggles even more tense are insufficient material resources. As far as financial resources are concerned, many of the jobs that used to be performed by blacks were replaced predominantly by immigrants coming to the United States from Latin

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<sup>20</sup> “L.A. Locke High School Students: Don’t Be Played by the System-Fight to Change the World,” Revolution, accessed February 28, 2018, <http://revcom.us/a/133/LockeHS133-en.html>.

<sup>21</sup> Associated Press, “Los Angeles High School Breaks Out in Violence,” *New York Times*, May 11, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/11/education/11school.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Howard Blume and Mitchell Landsberg, “Rival Latinos and Blacks Start Melee on South L.A. Campus,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 10, 2008, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/may/10/local/me-locke10>.

<sup>23</sup> Fields-Meyers, “Black vs. Brown at LA School.”

America. This issue causes problems between these two racial groups even nowadays, and among young people in particular.<sup>24</sup>

As stated in the 2015 annual report of the UCLA Labor Center, focusing on young workers in Los Angeles, blacks and Latinos held mainly low-wage jobs. Out of the total number of all young and low-wage workers in Los Angeles County, there are 64 percent Latino workers and 6 percent black workers. Moreover, figures show that Los Angeles youth have a higher unemployment rate than the county average (16.8%), and that people ages 18 to 24 tend to be unemployed (21.7%). As for blacks, the rate of unemployment is the highest of all workers (28.4%).<sup>25</sup> Other reasons for this are the impact of systematic policies, the politicians themselves, and last but not least, the media, whose coverage of racial issues helps to shape public opinion, which are all meant to stimulate and encourage these disputes.<sup>26</sup>

Locke High School belonged among the lowest-performing school at that time and was largely known for its immense number of student fights, affrays between gangs and its high dropout rate.<sup>27</sup> Although Obama did not give any particular comment on this incident, his administration introduced a set of School Improvement Grants in 2009, which have served to reduce costs and improve education in the worst failing schools in America.<sup>28</sup> As Locke High School was one of these schools, the decision was made to start over as a charter school operated by the Green Dot Public Schools organization. Two years after this turnaround, Locke High School had better results than before – lower dropout rates, higher test scores and a significant decrease of violent behaviour. The Department of Education now presents this school as a successful example of their effort to provide help to the most failing schools.<sup>29</sup>

### 3.2 Oakland riots

A few months after this riot, there was an affray between a young black man and a police officer again, this time ending in the death of the young man. This brawl took place

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<sup>24</sup> “Don’t Be Played by the System-Fight to Change the World.”

<sup>25</sup> Waheed Saba, Lucero Herrera, Blake Valenta, and Janna Shaddock-Hernández, *Young Workers in Los Angeles: A Snapshot* (Los Angeles: UCLA Labor Center, 2015) accessed February 28, 2018, <https://www.labor.ucla.edu/downloads/3604/>.

<sup>26</sup> “Don’t Be Played by the System-Fight to Change the World.”

<sup>27</sup> Sam Dillon, “School Is Turned Around, but Cost Gives Pause,” *New York Times*, June 24, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/25/education/25school.html>.

<sup>28</sup> “School Improvement Grants,” U.S. Department of Education, accessed April 16, 2018, <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/sif/index.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Dillon, “School Is Turned Around.”

on the first day of 2009 in Oakland, California, and the way he died caused several protests and increased racial disorders all over the Oakland. The whole incident started in the early hours on the New Year's Eve in the Fruitvale train station, situated in the centre of a black and Latino part of the city, when an alleged fight was reported to the Bay Area Rapid Transit Police Department, so-called "BART" in short. Three of the BART members were sent to calm down the situation and immediately began to pacify Latinos, as well as blacks. Without any evidence of a fight, policemen started targeting one black man, twenty-two-year-old Oscar Grant and his friends, - who were all unarmed, threatening with them their teasers and calling them swear words. It was reported by the witnesses of this incident that Grant submitted to the officers, but in spite of this fact, the officers increased their attack until the moment when one of the policemen, namely Johannes Mehserle, took out his gun and shot Grant fatally in his back.

As shown in the videos made by passengers on the train, the police officials showed no regrets for the shooting and they did not even call for an ambulance to help Grant; nor did they immediately report the shooting.<sup>30</sup> Nonetheless, justice was done when Johannes Mehserle was taken into custody and later convicted of involuntary manslaughter.<sup>31</sup> As far as the BART Police Department is concerned, its officials expressed their regrets but stated there was no video evidence displaying the incident, in spite of the fact there were cameras installed at every train station.<sup>32</sup>

Due to the fact that Oscar Grant, a young black man, was shot by a white police officer and that the police violence was treated inadequately, race relations between certain racial communities escalated and resulted in many riots between these two groups. Some compared this episode to the one that happened in Los Angeles in 1991, when Rodney King, who was also black, was brutally beaten by members of a local police department, who were subsequently cleared of using excessive force.<sup>33</sup>

There were many theories trying to describe Mehserle's reasons for this cold-blooded murder, such as mistaking a gun for a taser, or touching something on Grant while searching, something that was probably believed to be a weapon. But according to an expert police trainer, Mehserle was absolutely calm when shooting Grant, which might

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<sup>30</sup> "The Cold-Blooded Murder of Oscar Grant: What Happened the Night of January 1, 2009," *Revolution*, accessed March 1, 2018, <http://revcom.us/a/159/OGrant-en.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Tom Head, "The Shooting Death of Oscar Grant: What You Need to Know," *ThoughtCo*, December 28, 2017, <https://www.thoughtco.com/shooting-death-of-oscar-grant-721526>.

<sup>32</sup> "The Cold-Blooded Murder of Oscar Grant."

<sup>33</sup> Bobbie Johnson, "US Officer Held over Shooting Shown on YouTube," *Guardian*, January 14, 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jan/15/oscar-grant-shooting-arrest>.



prove that this shooting was not just an accident, but a real cold-blooded execution.<sup>34</sup> Another theory is that the major party at fault of not only this incident, but also all other assaults against black youth is the police and its whole system. This theory also states that this kind of attacks is a culmination of increasing hatred of police against blacks manifested by numerous assaults and threats. Moreover, the system did not treat the police officers fairly; instead, it tried to cover up what happened and justify these actions.<sup>35</sup>

Mehserle being convicted of an involuntary manslaughter seemed an inadequate punishment to the public, which wanted a second-degree murder charge for him. This injustice made people get together and demonstrate in the streets of Oakland, resulting in another riot, which got out of control - people damaged several buildings and other property in the town, and at least five hundred people were arrested.<sup>36</sup> Oakland is a city of nearly four hundred thousand inhabitants, located on the west coast of the US. Unfortunately, unlike its neighbouring cities, such as San Francisco or an area of Silicon Valley, Oakland belongs among the cities with the highest crime, unemployment and poverty and was ranked among the most dangerous cities in America.<sup>37</sup>

The brutal death of black Oscar Grant at the hands of a white police officer was significant for Obama, as it happened just a few days before his inauguration. Obama, as the first black president occupying the Oval Office, was supposed to bridge the racial divide in American society. However, the enthusiasm and interest in changing the race inequalities he showed during his campaign and that invoked hope in millions of people, especially African-Americans, were strongly undermined right from the beginning.<sup>38</sup>

### 3.3 Death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones

One of the events that attracted attention of the media and general public happened in Detroit, Michigan in 2010. A seven-year old black girl died after being shot while sleeping

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<sup>34</sup> Matthew B. Stannard and Demian Bulwa, "BART Shooting Captured on Video," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 7, 2009, <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/article/BART-shooting-captured-on-video-3177850.php>.

<sup>35</sup> "The Cold-Blooded Murder of Oscar Grant."

<sup>36</sup> Maria L. LaGanga and Abby Sewell, "Oakland Protesters Clash with Police after Verdict in BART Shooting," *Los Angeles Times*, July 9, 2010, <http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jul/09/local/la-me-rally-20100709>.

<sup>37</sup> Johnson, "US Officer Held over Shooting Shown on YouTube."

<sup>38</sup> Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "Barack Obama's Original Sin: America's Post-Racial Illusion," *Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jan/13/barack-obama-legacy-racism-criminal-justice-system>.

by a member of a SWAT team, Joseph Weekley.<sup>39</sup> Aiyana was sleeping on the sofa with her aunt, when suddenly a group of police officers invaded their house, and one of the policemen accidentally shot the little girl in the head.<sup>40</sup> In spite of the fact that Weekley was regretful for killing Jones, he was charged with an involuntary manslaughter.<sup>41</sup> During the subsequent trials the jury did not convict Weekley, and eventually the charges against him were dismissed due to a lack of evidence.<sup>42</sup>

After it was discovered that a man the police were looking for lived on a different floor in the house, so the police raid into the Jones residence was a fatal mistake, a strong wave of criticism emerged not only from the public, especially from black neighbourhoods, but also some people who deal with civil rights. Answers were required to many questions about the SWAT team deployment in this case.<sup>43</sup> Due to increased publicity, several protests about increasing brutal law enforcement took place after Aiyana's death, many of them at her funeral the week after. Moreover, an activist group called Black Matters US organized a rally commemorating Aiyana. Many people called for justice not only for Aiyana, but also for other children who died due to excessive police brutality.<sup>44</sup>

As for the Jones family, they were fighting for justice for a long time, giving a speech at her funeral, hiring a lawyer and suing the police department of Detroit and managing to get the attention of John Conyers, a Democratic Congressman, who eventually charged the Federal Bureau of Investigation to look deeply into this case.<sup>45</sup> As Obama did not give any remark on Aiyana's passing, the Jones family started a petition in 2015 addressed to President Obama, calling for justice for Aiyana and demanding a federal civil rights investigation to be opened. To this point, it has not been.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Jake Harris, "Justice for Aiyana Jones Rally," *Black Matters US*, May 21, 2016, <https://blackmattersus.com/8206-justice-for-aiyana-jones-rally/>.

<sup>40</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, "I'm Worried They Went Hollywood?: Investigation after Girl, 7, Was Shot Dead during Bungled Police Raid as Camera Crew Filmed SWAT Team," *Daily Mail*, November 22, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1331989/Aiyana-Stanley-Jones-Investigation-girl-7-shot-dead-bungled-police-raid.html>.

<sup>41</sup> "Cop Testifies He Didn't Mean to Kill 7-Year-Old Girl," CBS Detroit, accessed April 17, 2018, <http://detroit.cbslocal.com/2013/06/13/detroit-cop-testifies-he-didnt-mean-to-kill-7-year-old-girl/>.

<sup>42</sup> Rose Hackman, "'She Was only a Baby': Last Charge Dropped in Police Raid that Killed Sleeping Detroit Child," *Guardian*, January 31, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jan/31/detroit-aiyana-stanley-jones-police-officer-cleared>.

<sup>43</sup> Hackman, "She."

<sup>44</sup> Black Matters US, "Justice For Aiyana Jones Rally."

<sup>45</sup> Daily Mail Reporter, "Investigation."

<sup>46</sup> "Open a Federal/Civil Rights Investigation of the Death of Aiyana Stanley-Jones," Change, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://www.change.org/p/barack-obama-loretta-e-lynch-american-civil-liberties-union-southern-poverty-law-center-justice-for-7-year-old-aiyana-stanley->

### 3.4 Trayvon Martin shooting

The killing of Trayvon Martin, a young black man, is considered one of the most controversial cases in an American history. This tragedy emphasises not only a tragedy of one family, but also a violent brutality against people and their communities. These communities and their members, especially black boys, are mostly victims of racial bias, mocking or hatred not just by other community members, but also by police and other officials.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, this persecution of blacks, who are often stereotyped as criminals, has a long comes history. It is common nowadays to be prejudiced, so the idea of a young black man wearing a hoodie and walking down the street at night naturally leads people to think that this kind of a man must be guilty of some crime. All the prejudices, race and class-based, and fear of blackness helped to shape public perception of this event, as well as its media coverage.<sup>48</sup>

This event took place in Sanford, Florida on February 26, 2012. George Zimmerman, a twenty-eight year old white Hispanic community watch coordinator, was driving around the neighbourhood, when suddenly he caught sight of Trayvon Martin, who was returning from a convenience store.<sup>49</sup> Martin wearing his grey hoodie seemed quite suspicious, so Zimmerman called the nearest police department and told them about this boy. Despite the disobedience of police advice, Zimmerman started following Martin.<sup>50</sup> A few minutes later, he stepped out of his car and started chasing Martin. This resulted in a dispute ending with Zimmerman shooting Martin in the chest with his gun. When the local police arrived at the crime scene, they arrested Zimmerman and took him into custody. After the subsequent questioning, police came to the conclusion that Zimmerman acted in self-defence and as a result, Zimmerman was released for lack of evidence.

The decision to release Zimmerman caused indignation and outrage among people of all races, especially among black public figures, and attracted the attention of the national media. However, media coverage of this case was intense, but rather contradictory. It also

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jones?recruiter=6458342&utm\_source=share\_petition&utm\_medium=facebook&utm\_campaign=share\_face  
book\_responsive&utm\_term=des-lg-no\_src-no\_msg#petition-letter.

<sup>47</sup> Rebecca L. Toporek, "Violence against Individuals and Communities: Reflecting on the Trayvon Martin Case – An Introduction to the Special Issue," *Journal for Social Action in Counselling and Psychology* 5, no.1 (Spring 2013): 3, [http://psysr.org/jsacp/Toporek-v5n1-13\\_1-10.pdf](http://psysr.org/jsacp/Toporek-v5n1-13_1-10.pdf).

<sup>48</sup> Kenneth J. Fasching-Varner, Rema E. Reynolds, Katrice A. Albert and Lori L. Martin, eds., *Trayvon Martin, Race, and American Justice: Writing Wrong* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2014), XII.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 20 - 21.

<sup>50</sup> Greg Botelho, "What Happened the Night Trayvon Martin Died," *CNN*, May 23, 2012, <http://www.cnn.com/2012/05/18/justice/florida-teen-shooting-details>.

contributed to the fact that a special state prosecutor was assigned to investigate this incident. After his review of the case, Zimmerman was charged with second degree murder on April 11, but released on bail the day after.

The trial itself began two months later and brought different points of view on what had really happened that night. The witnesses were not able to concur in what preceded the shooting and who actually was the attacker. Taking these testimonies into account, the jury had to make a decision and pronounce a verdict.<sup>51</sup> Zimmerman was acquitted. According to one of the jurors, the evidence provided was simply not enough for the jury to convict Zimmerman. As far as race is concerned, the jury believed that race prejudice was not the reason for committing this crime. In addition, “race was not taken into consideration in reaching a verdict,” as it was difficult to prove that Zimmerman’s act of violence might have been racially biased.<sup>52</sup>

This tragedy led to a large number of public discussions and debates regarding race, racial profiling, police violence, criminal justice in the country and many more.<sup>53</sup> After the verdict was delivered, social media was deluged with reactions from people of all races, ethnicities, social classes and statuses, most of them saying that “this was a case of racial profiling.”<sup>54</sup> This criticism was accompanied by large demonstrations, protests and rallies all over the country calling for justice for Martin and requiring the Department of Justice to file federal civil rights charges against Zimmerman, because, as a national survey showed, 42 percent of respondents expressed their disagreement with the final verdict, while 39 percent stated they were satisfied with the result of the trial. In contrast, only 36 percent of respondents believe that this tragedy is important for future debates over racism and its issues. As far as blacks are concerned, their response to the case was massive – 86 percent of black respondents expressed their frustration and disapproval of Zimmerman’s acquittal.<sup>55</sup>

This tragedy could not have passed unnoticed or ignored by the leader of the country. Obama felt the need to speak about what had happened and explain to the whites why blacks felt betrayed by the system. Obama’s remark on Martin’s case and the final verdict

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<sup>51</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 21-22.

<sup>52</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 25.

<sup>53</sup> Devon Johnson, Patricia Y. Warren and Amy Farrell, eds., *Deadly Injustice: Trayvon Martin, Race, and the Criminal Justice System* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 2.

<sup>54</sup> Fasching-Varner, Reynolds, Albert and Martin, eds., *Trayvon Martin, Race and American Justice*, 2.

<sup>55</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 26.

in particular was his most important speech focused on race since becoming president of the United States.<sup>56</sup>

When he first spoke about the Trayvon Martin shooting, he expressed his empathy for Martin's parents and stated that this tragedy needed to be investigated thoroughly in order for every single parent in the country to understand why this happened. This statement was criticized, as people felt he only expressed empathy and sympathy for his own ethnic group. But the statement which caused an even bigger commotion was this one: "If I had a son, he'd look like Trayvon." According to Bernard Goldberg, a journalist and a cultural critic, Obama did not need to say this,<sup>57</sup> but Heidi Ardizzone, a professor at Saint Louis University, disagrees, contending that Obama saying this "invited young black men into the imagined framework of his family – a family he defines as representing our whole nation."<sup>58</sup> According to the president of the NAACP, Obama did the right thing to compare his potential son to Martin. He thinks "Obama's words spoke both to the universal pain felt about this case, the specific pain felt by the family and the need for our nation to look at itself in the mirror."<sup>59</sup>

Obama delivered another speech on Martin's case at a White House press briefing. In his sincere and heartfelt speech he wanted to highlight the way people reacted and how they were feeling. Obama felt a strong need to express his feelings and in view of the fact that he himself was being racially profiled since declaring run for presidency, he felt a sense of belonging with Martin's destiny.<sup>60</sup> He stated that "Trayvon Martin could have been me 35 years ago," explaining that the persisting injustice and persecution in the eyes of blacks comes from their own history, race prejudices and their own experiences, mentioning the experience of "being followed when shopping" or "getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off."<sup>61</sup> Obama also stated that "all contributes I think to a sense that if a white male teen was involved in the same kind of scenario, that, from top to bottom, both the outcome and the aftermath might have been different," meaning that young black males are

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<sup>56</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 9-10.

<sup>57</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 186-187.

<sup>58</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 259.

<sup>59</sup> Krissah Thompson and Scott Wilson, "Obama on Trayvon Martin: 'If I Had a Son, He'd Look Like Trayvon,'" *Washington Post*, March 23, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-if-i-had-a-son-hed-look-like-trayvon/2012/03/23/gIQApKPPVS\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.6a9b6ccc5360](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/obama-if-i-had-a-son-hed-look-like-trayvon/2012/03/23/gIQApKPPVS_story.html?utm_term=.6a9b6ccc5360).

<sup>60</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> "Remarks by the President on Trayvon Martin," White House, accessed March 7, 2018, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/07/19/remarks-president-trayvon-martin>.

generally considered to be aggressive and violent.<sup>62</sup> He also indicated some of the key points that should be made by the nation: to restore trust in the system, examine some state and local laws, support African-American boys and do a soul-searching, meaning to discuss race and race issues in families, at schools, in churches etc.<sup>63</sup>

Obama's impromptu speech was praised by many individuals and public figures, such as Senator John McCain, who stated that all states "should review their 'stand your ground' laws," as well as criticism for not "denouncing white racism."<sup>64</sup> Other appraisals included criticism of Obama's following statements: "each successive generation seems to be making progress in changing attitudes when it comes to race," in which he expressed his positive view about things getting better and "kids these days, I think, have more sense than we did back then, and certainly more than our parents did or our grandparents did," which, as some argue, definitely cannot be subject of any rational discussion on race. According to Michael E. Dyson, a professor and political analyst, Obama "could have sparked people to be more honest about their personal lives if he has spoken more forthrightly about the complicated jigsaw puzzle that is race and what we as Americans might do to make things fit more justly."<sup>65</sup>

### 3.5 Shooting of Jordan Davis

Despite Obama's impressive speech on Martin's case and importance of protecting young black men, the state of Florida registered one more death of a young black male in the same year. A seventeen-year old Jordan Davis died at the gas station at the hands of Michael Dunn, a white citizen of Jacksonville, who was annoyed by a loud music coming from Davis' car.<sup>66</sup> Michael Dunn was driving to St. Augustine, Florida with his girlfriend, when they decided to stop at the nearest gas station and get some wine. His girlfriend got off the car to get the wine while Dunn was waiting in the car. Despite having the doors and windows of the car closed, he could hear the loud music coming from an SUV parked near to Dunn's car. The loud music started to annoy Dunn so he asked Davis and his three friends to turn down the music. An altercation between Dunn and the black boys sparked off, when Dunn took off his 9mm gun out of the blue and shot Davis four times and then

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<sup>62</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> "Remarks."

<sup>64</sup> Daniel and Williams, *Race and the Obama Phenomenon*, 32.

<sup>65</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 12-13.

<sup>66</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 237.

four more times. When his girlfriend came back from the store, they got on the car and left without noticing one of the shots was deadly.

At the trial, Dunn told police that his action was driven by his need of safety and that he considered himself to be innocent.<sup>67</sup> However, the reasons for this murder might have been significantly different and some argue the drive for this action might be for example ambiguous lyrics of the rap music the boys were listening to, their clothing or their excitable behaviour.<sup>68</sup> Regardless of his testimony, the jury convicted Dunn of first-degree murder without parole for shooting Davis. He was also sentenced to another “ninety years in prison for three attempted murders and to another fifteen years for firing into an occupied vehicle.”<sup>69</sup>

Some argue that this tragedy is similar to Trayvon Martin’s tragedy I wrote about in the previous subchapter. As well as Martin’s case, this one also attracted public and media attention mainly because the victim was member of a black community, while the killer was white. The questions of racial profiling, ‘stand your ground’ law, as well as gun possession and gun violence have emerged again.<sup>70</sup>

As already mentioned, many also compared this case to the one of shooting Trayvon Martin. Not only both tragedies happened in the same state and the same year, it is believed that race was the main indicator in both cases. As stated by Kendall Coffey, an analyst and former US attorney, certain differences of these cases can be found, such as the number of shots, number of witnesses or willingness of attackers to cooperate with investigators during the process. These all made it difficult for Cory Strolla, a lawyer of Michael Dunn, to defend Dunn’s action and convince the jury that Dunn was acting in self-defence.<sup>71</sup>

Four years after this incident happened, Obama gave his tearful gun violence speech. He was surrounded by family members of those killed by shooting, including Jordan

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<sup>67</sup> Eliot C. McLaughlin and Devon Sayers, “Defendant Tells Police He Had Spat over Loud Music, Opened Fire, Ordered Pizza,” *CNN*, updated February 6, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/02/05/justice/florida-loud-music-murder-trial/index.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 238.

<sup>69</sup> Elisa Fieldstadt, “Michael Dunn Sentenced to Life without Parole for Loud Music Killing,” *NBC*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/michael-dunn-sentenced-life-without-parole-loud-music-killing-n228191>.

<sup>70</sup> Rick Neale, “Michael Dunn Murder Conviction Upheld in Loud-Music Fatal Shooting,” *Florida Today*, updated November 17, 2016, <https://www.floridatoday.com/story/news/crime/2016/11/17/michael-dunn-murder-conviction-upheld-loud-music-fatal-shooting/94019188/>.

<sup>71</sup> Richard Luscombe, “Michael Dunn Murder Trial under Way in Florida Echoes Trayvon Martin Case,” *Guardian*, February 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/feb/07/michael-dunn-murder-trial--florida-echoes-trayvon-martin-case>.

Davis' mother, Lucia McBath. This emotional speech included remarks on an urgent gun violence restriction and a need "to develop new technologies that make guns safer." Obama stated that it is important to try and work hard in order to make a change and that "all of us need to demand a Congress brave enough to stand up to the gun lobby's lies, all of us need to stand up and protect its citizens, all of us need to demand governors and legislators and businesses do their part to make our communities safer" and that "the rest of us, we all have to be just as passionate, we have to be just as organised in defence of our kids."<sup>72</sup>

### 3.6 Death of Eric Garner

"I can't breathe!" This saying became a slogan of numerous demonstrations protests after the jury delivered its final verdict on killing Eric Garner, a black man, choked by a member of local police department.<sup>73</sup> The incident happened on July 17, 2014 in New York City, when a forty-three year old black man – unarmed - saw a street brawl and tried to help to calm down the situation. After the police arrived, they immediately arrested Garner of allegedly selling untaxed cigarettes. Garner would not understand why he was the object of police attention and started to argue with the officers. The police members pulled Garner down and one of them, officer Daniel Pantaleo started to chokehold him, which is a method not allowed by New York Police Department. Garner was pronounced dead in the hours following the incident. The whole incident was recorded on a video, which after being published, made Pantaleo to turn in his gun and badge. The video was seen by mayor of New York City, Bill de Blasio, who promised the case would be investigated by the police department, as well as the prosecutors.<sup>74</sup>

In late September of the same year the trial began and Garner's family sued the city of New York and local police department for seventy-five million dollars arguing that a violent action of its member caused death of their husband, father and son. The reversal of the case occurred in December, when the jury delivered their final decision. Even though they saw the video record, they rejected to accuse Pantaleo explaining that there "was no

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<sup>72</sup> Dan Roberts, David Smith and Ben Jacobs, "Tearful Obama Tightens Gun Control and Tells Inactive Congress: 'We Can't Wait'," *Guardian*, January 5, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/jan/05/obama-gun-control-executive-action-background-checks-licenses-gun-shows-mental-health-funding>.

<sup>73</sup> Susanna Capelouto, "Eric Garner: The Haunting Last Words of a Dying Man," *CNN*, updated December 9, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/04/us/garner-last-words/index.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Josh Sanburn, "Behind the Video of Eric Garner's Deadly Confrontation with New York Police," *Time*, updated July 23, 2014, <http://time.com/3016326/eric-garner-video-police-chokehold-death/>.



probable cause that a crime was committed.” In response to that verdict, the Justice Department was assigned to reinvestigate the case by Eric Holder, U.S. General Attorney.<sup>75</sup>

The case itself and the subsequent decision of the jury caused numerous protest, demonstrations and rallies all around the United States. One of the well-known public figured and civil rights activist, Reverend Al Sharpton, even wanted to organize a national march in Washington to call for changes in the system and saying that “we are not advocating violence, we are asking that police violence stop.” Another civil rights group joined him in the need for justice system improvements. Ferguson Action Team stated that “Eric’s case illustrates the way police operate with impunity in black communities as they cast an ever-widening net of criminalization.” This Stops Now, another activist group, added that no matter the verdict is, it is necessary to end police violent law enforcement.<sup>76</sup> The protests took place not only in New York City, but some other American cities as well, such as Chicago, Denver or Boston. People were marching through the streets with the signs and posters repeating Garner’s ‘I Can’t Breathe’ statement, others were blocking the traffic or lying on the highway.<sup>77</sup>

Barack Obama gave his remark on the case, although he never comments on the cases while still being investigated. However, he made an exception in this case and delivered his statement at the 2014 White House Tribal Nations Conference. He pointed out that there is a strong need for change in “the relationship between law enforcement and communities of colour and minority communities that feel that bias is taking place; that we are going to take specific steps to improve the training and the work with state and local governments when it comes to policing in communities of colour.” He stated that trust in the system is important so that the police can make their job adequately and properly and that this is not a problem of blacks or other races, but an American problem, adding that “when anybody in this country is not being treated equally under the law, that’s a problem.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> “Timeline: Eric Garner Death,” NBC New York, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/Timeline-Eric-Garner-Chokehold-Death-Arrest-NYPD-Grand-Jury-No-Indictment-284657081.html>.

<sup>76</sup> Melanie Eversley and Mike James, “No Charges in NYC Chokehold Death; Federal Inquiry Launched,” *USA Today*, updated December 4, 2014, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2014/12/03/chokehold-grand-jury/19804577/>.

<sup>77</sup> “Eric Garner Death: Fresh Protests across US Cities,” BBC, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30341101>.

<sup>78</sup> Tanya Somanader, “President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Grand Jury Decision in the Death of Eric Garner,” *White House*, December 3, 2014,

### 3.7 Ferguson riots

St. Louis suburb of Ferguson, Missouri has been the centre of street riots and many protest rallies after a police officer Darren Wilson killed an unarmed eighteen-year old black male Michael Brown. Brown was hit by six bullets coming from Wilson's gun - two of them were shot in the head and four in his right arm and according to Dr. Michael Baden, the one deadly shot hit the top of his head and went into his skull.<sup>79</sup> Due to the fact that Brown was black and died at the hands of Wilson who was white, and who was acquitted after the investigation - which is similar to Eric Garner's case – public and media outraged and organized several rallies, street riots and protest calling for justice for Brown and for changes in violent police law enforcement.<sup>80</sup>

Police version of what happened during that night is quite different from what Brown's friend Dorian Johnson, who was on the crime scene with Brown, has stated. According to the police report, Brown and Johnson were said by the officer Wilson to step out of the roadway but they did not obey and Brown allegedly started attacking Wilson. As the fight burst out, Wilson's gun fired and Brown started to run away. When Brown saw Wilson was chasing him, he suddenly turned around and ran towards the officer, who started shooting him. However, this theory is incompatible with Johnson's remark on the incident. He told that during the incident, Wilson used swear words, hit Brown with his car's doors and seized him by the neck. After the gun fired and Brown started running, Wilson shot him, causing Brown stopped and shouted "I don't have a gun, stop shooting!" Notwithstanding his surrender and looking into his face, Wilson fired another five shots. It ought to be mentioned that Johnson's and police's versions of the tragedy were both supported by other eyewitnesses, which sparked other controversies of this case.<sup>81</sup>

Many people all around the US wondered about the possible punishment for Wilson regarding verdicts in recent similar cases. After a proper investigation, the jury decided not

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<https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/12/03/president-obama-delivers-statement-grand-jury-decision-death-eric-garner>.

<sup>79</sup> "Ferguson protests: What We Know about Michael Brown's Last Minutes," BBC, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-28841715>.

<sup>80</sup> Jon Swaine and Oliver Laughland, "Darren Wilson Will Not Face Federal Charges in Michael Brown Shooting," *Guardian*, March 4, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/mar/04/darren-wilson-federal-criminal-charges-michael-brown-shooting>.

<sup>81</sup> Matt Pearce, "Back Story: What Happened in Michael Brown Shooting in Ferguson, Mo.?", *Los Angeles Times*, November 24, 2014, <http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-back-story-ferguson-shooting-story.html>.

to press any charges against Wilson.<sup>82</sup> Another investigation of this case was later conducted by a Department of Justice, which also came to the conclusion that Wilson did not commit any crime when shooting Brown. After the verdict, a lawsuit against the city of Ferguson, the officer Darren Wilson and officer-in-chief Thomas Jackson have been filed by Brown's family.<sup>83</sup> This lawsuit was successful and Brown's family won one and half a million dollar settlement.<sup>84</sup>

As for Warren's opinion about the whole situation, he took full responsibility for what he did but personally he felt no guilt. As it is evident from the interview with Wilson, he tried to justify his crime by claiming he was feared about his safety and he just did his job. He never mentioned Brown's name and always spoke in the third person. Wilson became reconciled to the consequences and never asked for forgiveness or admitted he would have acted differently.<sup>85</sup>

The city of Ferguson, as well as other cities across America became the centre of mass street riots and protests against this tragedy and a non-guilty verdict for Wilson afterwards. Before the verdict was declared, the state of Missouri was in the state of emergency, as the riots got out of control and National Guard troops had to be called in.<sup>86</sup> The then governor of Missouri, Jay Nixon, even banned to be on the streets after midnight. The protests escalated quickly and several people got arrested for violent behaviour during the protests.<sup>87</sup> The months following the shooting marked public tension and many questions regarding racial bias of police have occurred. As Wilson was white and Brown was black, many people considered the shooting to be a case of racism and racial bias rather than a case of criminal law. The statistics of crime in Ferguson did not help to change public opinion either. As stated in the official report of the Department of Justice focused on racial bias in Ferguson, 93 percent of all arrested people are blacks, while the population of

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<sup>82</sup> Felicia R. Stewart, and Derrick M. Bryan, "Did He Apologize?: The Sociological Impact of Darren Wilson's Rhetoric," *Phylon* 53, no.1 (Summer 2016): 68-69, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/phylon1960.53.1.67>.

<sup>83</sup> Tierney Sneed, "Michael Brown's Family Files Lawsuit against Darren Wilson, Ferguson," *US News*, April 23, 2015, <https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/04/23/michael-brown-family-files-lawsuit-against-darren-wilson-ferguson-officials>.

<sup>84</sup> Emily Shapiro and Will Gretskey, "Michael Brown's Family Wins \$1.5 Million Settlement, Ferguson City Attorney Says," *ABC News*, June 23, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/michael-browns-family-settles-lawsuit-15-million-ferguson/story?id=48234904>.

<sup>85</sup> Stewart, and Bryan, "Did He Apologize?," 71-75.

<sup>86</sup> "Michael Brown Shooting: Ferguson Jury Reaches Verdict," BBC, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30185686>.

<sup>87</sup> Raf Sanchez and David Lawler, "Ferguson: Timeline of Events since Michael Brown's Death," *Telegraph*, August 10, 2015, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/11242108/Ferguson-timeline-of-events-since-Michael-Browns-death.html>.

blacks makes 67 percent of all. In addition, the figure is even higher in case of ‘manner of walking in roadway’ – 95 percent accusations for black people. After the report was published, the city government dismissed several officers, including the police chief, Tom Jackson.<sup>88</sup>

In his first remark on the tragedy, Barack Obama said that “the death of Michael Brown is heart-breaking” and he expressed his sympathy to the whole community and pointed out that “we should comfort each other and talk with one another in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.”<sup>89</sup> After the verdict was delivered, more extensive speech was given by him. In his statement, he emphasized the then persisting doubts about police law enforcement. He stated that what had happened in Ferguson “speaks to broader challenges that we still face as a nation” and that “this is not just an issue for Ferguson, this is an issue for America.” Obama mentioned that the distrust might come from racial bias and prejudices that exist from everlasting in the US history and he suggested a few steps to overcome this issue, such as to improve relationships between police law enforcement and local communities by saying that this could not be reached by vandalism or physical harm. He expressed his belief on focusing the attention on the problem effectively and by this making progress in all cities and communities in America.<sup>90</sup> According to some experts, Obama’s speeches about Ferguson shooting and rioting were inadequate and disappointing, meaning that his language was “careful and qualified, cautious, and perhaps a tad too clinical – a language that hardly captures the fiery realities that burn in black bodies and communities.” They think Obama made a mistake by not mentioning all the realities that caused not only the tragedy in Ferguson, but also in other cities, such as “the decades of police aggression, killing of unarmed black people, poverty of African-American citizens, social inequality or distrust in criminal justice system.”<sup>91</sup>

### 3.8 Baltimore protests

Baltimore, Maryland became a centre of numerous protests and street riots in April, 2015. A twenty-five year old African-American male, Freddie Gray, got in dispute with

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<sup>88</sup> “Ferguson Unrest: From Shooting to Nationwide Protests,” BCC, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30193354>.

<sup>89</sup> David Hudson, “President Obama Issues a Statement on the Death of Michael Brown,” *White House*, August 12, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/08/12/president-obama-issues-statement-death-michael-brown>.

<sup>90</sup> Lindsay Holst, “President Obama Delivers a Statement on the Ferguson Grand Jury’s Decision,” *White House*, November 24, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/11/24/president-obama-delivers-statement-ferguson-grand-jurys-decision>.

<sup>91</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 194-195.

local police officers. One week after they arrested him, he died of a spinal injury in custody. The whole incident was video recorded by eyewitnesses and the videos quickly spread over social media and allured attention of general public. The whole incident stayed quite unclear over a long period of time, as the theories of what happened were contradictory.<sup>92</sup>

The theory of a police department involved in the whole situation described their action as follows: local police patrol was driving through the streets, when one of the officers made an eye contact with two black males. As soon as these two noticed, they started running away. The officers reached them quickly and Gray gave up on his own accord. Gray suffered of breathing problems, so the police transported him with their van. Gray was handcuffed and his legs were shackled too. He died of a spinal injury one week later. What has caused his injury is quite unclear and as stated by Baltimore Deputy Police Commissioner Jerry Rodriguez, Gray suffered a severe injury, but “I don’t know if it happened prior to him getting into the van or while he was in the van.”<sup>93</sup> An autopsy have been made and several experts compared “his injury to those sustained when someone dives into too-shallow water”<sup>94</sup>

Before the trial started, the charges were pressed against six police officers, who were connected to that case. However, the trial did not go the way it should because of different theories on the case and contradictory testimonies. The Justice Department began to investigate the case and later the inquiry decided to acquit all six police officers. The reasons for the verdict were stated in their report, saying that there was “insufficient evidence to support federal criminal civil right charges against the officers.”<sup>95</sup>

The story of Freddie Gray became a symbol of misery and hopelessness for all communities across America. According to Jesse Jackson, a civil rights activist who helped to eulogize Gray, “the young man was now more than a citizen and had become a martyr.” Few hours after Gray’s funeral in Baltimore, where people were grieving over Gray, as well as other people who died at the hands of police, the massive riots burst out in the

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<sup>92</sup> John Woodrow Cox, Lynh Bui and DeNeen L. Brown, “Who Was Freddie Gray? How Did He Die? And What Led to the Mistrial in Baltimore?,” *Washington Post*, December 16, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/who-was-freddie-gray-and-how-did-his-death-lead-to-a-mistrial-in-baltimore/2015/12/16/b08df7ce-a433-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.169bdc3e0b21](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/who-was-freddie-gray-and-how-did-his-death-lead-to-a-mistrial-in-baltimore/2015/12/16/b08df7ce-a433-11e5-9c4e-be37f66848bb_story.html?utm_term=.169bdc3e0b21).

<sup>93</sup> Joshua Berlinger, “Police Release Timeline of Events Leading up to Freddie Gray’s Death,” *CNN*, updated April 23, 2015, <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/20/us/freddie-gray-baltimore-timeline/index.html>.

<sup>94</sup> Woodrow Cox, Bui and Brown, “Who.”

<sup>95</sup> Sophie Tatum and Laura Jarrett, “DOJ Will Not Prosecute Officers in Freddie Gray Case,” *CNN*, updated September 13, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/09/12/politics/justice-department-freddie-gray/index.html>.

streets of Baltimore.<sup>96</sup> What at first seemed like a peaceful protest of people in despair soon soared and turned into aggressive and brutal riots. The streets were full of infuriated people, who set police cars on fire, damaged buildings, plundered stores and fought with police officers.<sup>97</sup> Same as in Ferguson, the state of emergency was declared by the governor Larry Hogan and the troops of National Guard must have been called in to calm down the riot. The curfew was settled for all the citizens as well.<sup>98</sup> But according to some, the riots which were the most dramatic since 2001 only made things worse as the city of Baltimore already belongs among the most dangerous cities in America. The gangs, crimes and violent behaviour are an everyday occurrence so the vacancies are difficult to be filled with workers and the businesses do not thrive, as the prices are high due to weak competition. Even the city representatives were involved in a corruption mechanism - as discovered by Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2012 - which also leads to distrust in criminal justice system.<sup>99</sup>

Obama's remark on the Gray's death and situation in Baltimore included importance of developing trust in the justice system. Obama suggested using advanced technologies to provide justice for every person no matter the race, stating that "this is not new, and we shouldn't pretend that it's new. The good news is that "perhaps there's some newfound awareness, because of social media and video cameras and so forth, that there are problems and challenges when it comes to how policing and our laws are applied in certain communities and we have to pay attention to it." Moreover, he emphasized that this issue "is not new, it's been going on for decades," and that America needed to pay more attention to this issue, not only when tragedies like this happens: "we should be paying attention all the time because we consider those kids our kids, and we think they're important and that they shouldn't be living in poverty and violence."<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 210-211.

<sup>97</sup> Woodrow Cox, Bui and Brown, "Who."

<sup>98</sup> Jon Swaine, Ben Jacobs and Paul Lewis, "Baltimore Protests Turn into Riots as Mayor Declares State of Emergency," *Guardian*, April 28, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/apr/27/baltimore-police-protesters-violence-freddie-gray>.

<sup>99</sup> "Why Rioting Makes Things Worse," *Economist*, accessed March 16, 2018, <https://www.economist.com/news/united-states/21650158-angry-youths-burn-their-own-neighbourhood-why-rioting-makes-things-worse>.

<sup>100</sup> Tanya Somanader, "President Obama on Freddie Gray's Death: 'This is Not New, and We Shouldn't Pretend that It's New.'," *White House*, April 28, 2015, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2015/04/28/president-obama-freddie-gray-s-death-not-new-and-we-shouldn-t-pretend-it-s-new>.

### 3.9 Walter Scott shooting

The city of Charleston, South Carolina became a centre of a nationwide attention in 2015, when two racial biased tragedies took place there. The first of them happened in April, when an unarmed African-American male was killed by a member of local police department, the officer Michael Slager. What is special about this case is that a video record of this affray helped to convict Slager of murdering Scott.<sup>101</sup> Slager was on a guard in the northern part of the city, when he stopped Scott for a traffic control. The situation got out of control, when Slager felt threatened as he thought Scott was trying to pull out his taser so he took out his own gun and shot Scott.<sup>102</sup> Michael Slager admitted his fault saying that he “used deadly force even though it was objectively unreasonable under the circumstances.”<sup>103</sup> Eventually, Slager was convicted of a second-degree murder and sentenced to twenty years in federal prison.

One of Scott’s brothers, Rodney Scott, stated that “we got justice” and that they are “thankful for the justice system that worked on our behalf” but admitted that this was just a small step and “a lot of work still needs to be done in the justice system.”<sup>104</sup> Justin Bamberg, a family attorney and state legislator agreed and stated that “the fight for justice can’t stop here, and we all owe it to ourselves and those around us to continue to fight to make the system better.” Chris Stewart, who was also one of the attorneys of Scott’s family agreed with Scott’s statement and added that “this is an historic day for civil rights, in particular for officer-involved shooting.”<sup>105</sup> This case helped to renew protests of a civil rights activist group Black Lives Matter and sparked other protests against police’s mistreat of African-American people.<sup>106</sup> In addition, it brought massive attention to the perception of black people and how their lives can be humiliated and valued.<sup>107</sup> This event also resulted in discussions regarding body cameras for police officers. The White House

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<sup>101</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 203.

<sup>102</sup> “Ex-police Officer Michael Slager Gets 20 Years for Walter Scott’s Death,” Thomson Reuters, accessed March 16, 2018, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/walter-scott-michael-slager-sentence-1.4438503>.

<sup>103</sup> Alan Blinder, “Ex-officer Who Shot Walter Scott Pleads Guilty in Charleston,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/us/michael-slager-walter-scott-north-charleston-shooting.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Steve Osunsami and Emily Shapiro, “Ex-cop Michael Slager Sentenced to 20 Years for Shooting Death of Walter Scott,” *ABC*, December 7, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/cop-michael-slager-faces-19-24-years-prison/story?id=51595376>.

<sup>105</sup> Meridith Edwards and Dakin Andone, “Ex-South Carolina Cop Michael Slager Gets 20 Years for Walter Scott Killing,” *CNN*, updated December 7, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/12/07/us/michael-slager-sentencing/index.html>.

<sup>106</sup> Tim Stelloh, “Sentencing Begins for Michael Slager, Ex-cop Who Killed Walter Scott,” *NBC*, December 4, 2017, <https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/walter-scott-shooting/sentencing-begins-michael-slager-ex-cop-who-killed-walter-scott-n826431>.

<sup>107</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 202.

press secretary Josh Earnest said that Obama was aware of this case and emphasized a need of buying body cameras for all police officers, which is a project highly supported by Obama himself.<sup>108</sup>

### 3.10 Charleston church shooting

One of the most tragic events in the history of America is the terrorist attack that happened in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015. What is special about this place is that Charleston is considered “a ground zero in the history of tortured race relations in America.”<sup>109</sup> A young white supremacist, Dylann Roof, killed nine black people during a mass at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, in order to “provoke a race war.” This tragedy is sometimes described as “a tragic monument in the landscape of white racial terror.” It was a special act of race, especially because the target of this act was a black church, a place where blacks meet one another and where “the sacredness of black existence finds vocal affirmation.”<sup>110</sup>

On June 17, 2015, Dylann Roof, a twenty-one year old man, walked into the church, welcomed by the other church-goers. The Bible reading session was taking place when Roof pulled out his gun and started firing. One of the parishioners stood up to Roof and asked him why he was doing this. Roof calmly responded that he felt it was needed because “y’all raping our women and taking over the world” and shot the parishioner five times right away. After killing eight more people, he got on the car and left. The day after he was arrested, the police searched his car and found a list of Charleston churches, a Confederate flag, a burned U.S. flag and the gun with some other equipment.<sup>111</sup>

During the trial, some members of dependants’ families stated they forgave Roof, even though Roof himself never regretted and did not feel sorry for what he has done, stating that “I still feel like I had to do it.”<sup>112</sup> Subsequently, he was charged of thirty-three counts including “hate crimes resulting in death and obstruction of exercise of religion resulting in death.” Roof pleaded guilty and eventually was sentenced to death. According to the

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<sup>108</sup> “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Josh Earnest, 4/8/2015,” *White House*, accessed April 17, 2018, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/04/08/press-briefing-press-secretary-josh-earnest-482015>.

<sup>109</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 262.

<sup>110</sup> Dyson, *The Black Presidency*, 239.

<sup>111</sup> Emily Shapiro, “Key Moments in Charleston Church Shooting Case as Dylann Roof Pleads Guilty to State Charges,” *ABC*, April 10, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/key-moments-charleston-church-shooting-case-dylann-roof/story?id=46701033>.

<sup>112</sup> Emily Shapiro, Anne Emerson and Kristen McFann, “Dylann Roof Sentenced to Death, 1<sup>st</sup> to Get Death Penalty for Hate Crimes,” *ABC*, January 10, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/charleston-church-shooter-dylann-roof-sentenced-death/story?id=44674575>.



Justice Department, this is “the first time a death penalty verdict was rendered in a federal hate crimes case.”<sup>113</sup>

The killing of nine people has sparked another protests and debates against gun possession, racial issues and violence. Besides, many people demanded to demote the Confederate flag, as it is has its supporters, as well as many dissenters.<sup>114</sup> As for the President, Obama expressed his sympathy with all the families influenced by this tragedy and stated that “there is something particularly heart-breaking about the death happening in a place in which we seek solace and we seek peace, in a place of worship.” He emphasized the importance and role of the affected black church on history of the city of Charleston and the history of America and remarked that “hatred across races and faith pose a particular threat to our democracy and our ideals.” He stated that “at some point we will have to deal with the fact that this kind of mass violence doesn’t happen in other countries and it is in our power to do something about it.” Last, but not least, he referred to Martin Luther King’s speech on 1963 bombing of a church in Alabama, where King stated that “we must be concerned not just with who murdered them, but they way of life, the philosophy that produced the murderers.”<sup>115</sup>

### 3.11 Shooting of Philando Castile

One of the recent cases of lethal force against black people took place in St. Anthony, Minnesota in July, 2016. Philando Castile, a thirty-two year old black school cafeteria worker was shot by a Latino officer Jeronimo Yanez during a traffic control. After Castile, who was in the car with his wife and her daughter told the officer he was armed – he had a legally possessed gun – but was not going to take out the gun, Yanez fired seven shots and killed him. The whole incident was video recorded by Castile’s girlfriend Diamond Reynolds who sent the video viral. Subsequently, Yanez was dismissed from local police department.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Shapiro, “Key.”

<sup>114</sup> Bryan Logan, “The Tone-deaf Responses to the Charleston Shooting Have Been Downright Baffling,” *Business Insider*, June 24, 2015, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-tone-deaf-responses-to-the-charleston-shooting-have-been-downright-baffling-2015-6>.

<sup>115</sup> “Statement by the President on the Shooting in Charleston, South Carolina,” White House, accessed March 29, 2018, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/06/18/statement-president-shooting-charleston-south-carolina>.

<sup>116</sup> Michelle Mark, “Philando Castile’s Girlfriend Has Reached an \$800,000 Settlement over the Fatal Police Shooting She Live-Streamed,” *Business Insider*, November 29, 2017, <http://www.businessinsider.com/diamond-reynolds-makes-philando-castile-shooting-settlement-2017-11>.

In the trial following the shooting, Yanez stated that Castile did not listen to his orders not to take out the gun and that he felt threatened by him. However, according to the video, Castile was not going to pull out the gun saying “I’m not pulling it out,” he only wanted to take out his wallet to prove his identity and show the officer his driving license. Eventually, Yanez was acquitted of manslaughter.<sup>117</sup> Few months later, Castile’s mother was paid almost three million dollars “to settle a wrongful death claim” and his girlfriend reached an eight hundred thousand dollar settlement.<sup>118</sup> Castile was known for paying lunches to those students who could not afford it with his own money at the elementary school where he worked. In his honour, a fund called ‘Philando Feeds the Children’ was created and its main aim is to follow Castile’s good deed and collect money to pay off the lunch debt at schools.<sup>119</sup>

The final verdict of the jury sparked public outcry among black community and activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter. Even Obama’s remark on the shooting was alarming. In his speech he stated that it is ‘symptomatic of the broader challenges within our criminal justice system, the racial disparities that appear across the system year after year, and the resulting lack of trust that exists between law enforcement and too many of the communities they serve.’ He expressed his wish that America as a nation should work a lot more on improving “the practices that reduce the appearance or reality of racial bias in law enforcement.” Moreover, he appealed on communities to get better their community policies in order to “restore confidence that all people in this great nation are equal before the law.” He called upon the American citizens to get together and “keep faith with one another, in order to ensure a future where all of our children know that their lives matter.”<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> Associated Press in St. Anthony, “Philando Castile’s Mother Reaches \$3m Settlement over Son’s Shooting Death,” *Guardian*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/26/philando-castile-settlement-death-police-shooting>.

<sup>118</sup> Karma Allen, “Philando Castile’s Girlfriend to Receive \$800,000 Settlement for Emotional Distress, False Arrest,” *ABC*, November 29, 2017, <http://abcnews.go.com/US/philando-castiles-girlfriend-receive-800000-settlement-emotional-distress/story?id=51453256>.

<sup>119</sup> Cady Lang, “This Fund Honors Philando Castile’s Legacy by Paying for Students’ Lunches,” *Time*, September 1, 2017, <http://time.com/4925134/philando-castile-fund-student-lunches/>.

<sup>120</sup> Melanie Garunay, “President Obama on the Fatal Shootings of Alton Sterling and Philando Castile,” *White House*, July 7, 2016, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2016/07/07/president-obama-fatal-shootings-alton-sterling-and-philando-castile>.

### 3.12 Charlotte riot

The latest controversial case during Obama administration took place in Charleston, North Carolina in September 2016. Keith Lamont Scott, who was black male, was sitting in his car in the parking lot, when several police officers, who were looking for someone else, went to him. One of the officers, Brentley Vinson – also black, saw him having a gun and felt threatened so he shot Scott three times. According to Scott's family there was no gun, but as video records show, officers were ordering Scott to drop the gun. The record did not show if Scott actually had the gun or not.<sup>121</sup> After the thorough investigation and video inquiry the jury after two months lasting trial decided that Vinson was innocent and he did not commit any crime so he was cleared of all charges.

The shooting of Scott burst out several riots across the city of Charlotte and caused numerous violent disputes, including killing of a man. The shooting again arose questions and discussions regarding the police brutal law enforcement and the use of deadly force.<sup>122</sup> According to U.S General Attorney Loretta Lynch, the protests “once again highlighted – in the most vivid and painful terms – the real divisions that still persist in this nation between law enforcement and communities of colour.”<sup>123</sup> Barack Obama reacted similarly and said that the violence would not help to make any changes stating that only being peaceful could help to change the justice system.<sup>124</sup>

Even though Obama brought hope and vision of a more perfect union to many people across the country, race relations during the Obama presidency worsened. It was not that Obama has risen racism, but racism definitely became one of the most discussed topics during his administration.<sup>125</sup> Many street riots and protests took place in different parts of America, especially due to brutal and violent law enforcement by police attacking mostly

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<sup>121</sup> Niraj Chokshi, “Keith Lamont Scott Was Killed by Two Gunshot Wounds, Family Autopsy Finds,” *New York Times*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/13/us/keith-lamont-scott-was-killed-by-two-gunshot-wounds-family-autopsy-finds.html>.

<sup>122</sup> Holly Yan, Rolando Zenteno and Brian Todd, “Keith Scott Killing: No Charges against Officer,” *CNN*, updated December 1, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/30/us/keith-lamont-scott-case-brentley-vinson/index.html>.

<sup>123</sup> Ed Lavandera, Boris Sanchez and Steve Almasy, “One Person Shot during Violent Charlotte Protest; Officer Hurt,” *CNN*, updated September 22, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/21/us/charlotte-police-shooting/index.html>.

<sup>124</sup> Kevin Liptak, “Obama: Violent Protests Won’t Solve Policing Issues,” *CNN*, updated September 22, 2016, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/09/22/politics/obama-police-violence-protests-charlotte-tulsa/index.html>.

<sup>125</sup> Ashraf M. Esmail, Lisa Eargle, Anna Evans Lamikanra, and Sonya Armstrong, “The Art of Killing a Dream,” *Race, Gender & Class* 20, no. 3/4 (2013): 66, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43496933>.

unarmed African-American men and some activists groups, such as Black Lives Matter, were established in order to improve the justice system.

At the beginning of Obama's presidency, most of the Americans thought the race would be improved during his term, however at the end of his presidency most of the people expressed their concerns and stated that the race relations got worse. According to certain criticisms, Obama did not pay enough attention to the racial issues and rather prioritised the LGBT community's issues. However, during the course of his term, he became more emphatic and passionate about racial matters, such as in the case of Trayvon Martin and the comparison of him and Obama's possible son. He also often referred to Martin Luther King, a civil rights activist, respected by many people no matter the colour of their skin.

Although he was always positive and often used his slogan "Yes, we can" to appeal on people, he never was that naïve to think that the change can be made by one black man occupying the White House, nor he thought it could be made during his two four-years terms. It was also said that "although it was a presidency that began atop a mountain, it ended in something of a valley."<sup>126</sup> On the other hand, "the election and re-election of the nation's first non-white president was a major milestone for the nation, much work still remains to be done in this country regarding race relations and equality."<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Nick Bryant, "Barack Obama Legacy: Did He Improve US Race Relations?" *BBC*, January 10, 2017, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38536668>.

<sup>127</sup> Esmail, Eargle, Evans Lamikanra, and Armstrong, "The Art of Killing a Dream," 77.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis is focused on race relations and Barack Obama, and mostly, on the Obama presidency and its impact on the race relations in American society. It proves that Obama worsened American race relations, and that he as a black president did not help to bridge racial inequalities. Although Obama had a strong vision of post-racial society, America under his presidency witnessed numerous mostly racially-oriented riots, many of which were not rightfully punished.

From the very beginning, one of the most important issues for Obama was race relations. He claimed that the change America seeks it not easy but is possible if people unite and work hard towards a better future. As a candidate, Obama provoked optimism in millions of people who trusted in him and gave him his votes. Therefore Obama's presidential victory is considered one of the biggest milestones not only for civil right activists but also for average black citizens. However, Obama's effort to heal racial divisions was not successful. Moreover, race relations worsened and prejudices and discrimination, especially against blacks, increased significantly under his presidency. Most of the affrays and riots that happened during his presidency were black-oriented, and the attackers were mostly white police, many of whom were not punished, as the criminal justice system is biased and in some cases the police covered up their crimes.

Obama was supposed to cross over racial divides, diminish inequalities, and prevent racially-oriented attacks from happening. In spite of his effort, he never achieved these goals, as his optimism, drive for change and rhetorical skills slightly melted away as he stepped into the White House. Even though his presidency will be remembered for giving birth to some civil rights activist groups, such as Black Lives Matter, he left race relations more tense and society even more polarized than they were before his presidency. Americans will need much more than just a black president to achieve change.

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