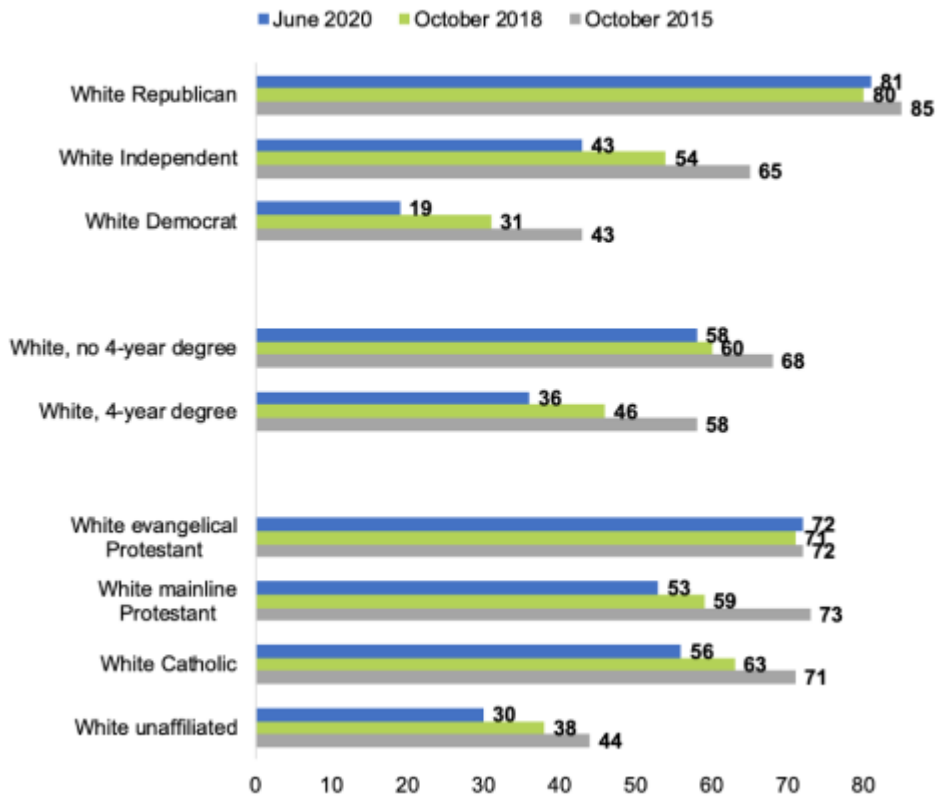


Majority of White Christians see no pattern in killings

by [Dawn Araujo-Hawkins](#) in the [September 23, 2020](#) issue

**Perceptions of Police Killings of Unarmed Black Men, 2015-2020  
by White Subgroups**

*Percent who say recent police killings of unarmed Black men are isolated incidents:*



Sources: PRRI June 2020 Survey, PRRI 2018 American Values Survey, PRRI 2015 American Values Survey.

Two days before Rusten Sheskey, a White police officer in Kenosha, Wisconsin, fired seven shots into the back of Jacob Blake, a Black man, at close range while three of Blake’s young children watched, the Public Religion Research Institute published its latest report on racism and police brutality.

During a summer punctuated by White police officers gunning down Black body after Black body, PRRI found that most White Christians—across denominations—continued to see such shootings as isolated incidents.

Based on polling done in June, the majority of White mainline Protestants (53 percent), White Catholics (56 percent), and White evangelicals (72 percent) believe that when the police kill a Black man, it is not representative of a pattern in the way

law enforcement treats Black people.

Furthermore, many White Christians also believe that discrimination against White people has become “just as big of a problem” as discrimination against Black people. On this question, 43 percent of White mainline Protestants agreed, along with 51 percent of White Catholics, and 56 percent of White evangelicals.

Melanie C. Jones, director of the Katie Geneva Cannon Center for Womanist Leadership at Union Presbyterian Seminary, is not surprised; she said the inability of White Christians to see assaults against Black life for what they are has been more than 400 years in the making.

“The terrorization of Black bodies is America’s holy grail,” Jones told the *Century*. “For White Christians to reckon with anti-Blackness as systemic evil agitates and disrupts White Christian complicity.”

But the time might be ripe for such a disruption—or at least the African Methodist Episcopal Church hopes so. In a statement, the denomination called Blake’s shooting an example of political tyranny and asked the wider faith community to partner with them in “resisting and overcoming white rage and terrorism.”

To activists, the events following Blake’s shooting made it clear just how embedded anti-Blackness and implicit bias are within policing.

As Blake, who admitted to having a knife in his car (but not on his person) when he was shot, lay in the hospital—paralyzed from the waist down yet handcuffed to his bed—cell phone video surfaced showing police officers giving water to and thanking a group of White men, armed with long guns, who had taken to the streets to counteract the protests that had erupted in Blake’s name.

Even when a member of this self-declared White militia, 17-year-old Kyle Rittenhouse, fatally shot two protesters and injured a third with an AR-15-style rifle on August 25, the police allowed him to walk away, unencumbered. Rittenhouse was arrested the next day at his mother’s home in Antioch, Illinois.

Wil Gafney, an Episcopal priest and professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School, cautions that expecting a large-scale shift in how White Christians view police brutality, even in the face of mounting evidence, is likely futile—because denying certain aspects of reality is exactly how Whiteness works.

“As a perspectival phenomenon, whiteness wilfully ignores and denies evidence of realities that do not accord with narratives constructed by whiteness,” she said in an email to the Century. “Therefore, individual persons and communities—churches, political parties—create and assert alternative whiteness-affirming narratives to explain away the unwelcome intruding reality.”

In the meantime, Black people continue to work on disruptions of their own.

On August 26, the day after Rittenhouse killed the Kenosha protesters, the majority-Black Milwaukee Bucks NBA team refused to play, causing the multibillion-dollar sports league’s play-off schedule to grind to a halt. Dressed in a shirt that read “Change the Narrative,” Bucks player George Hill told reporters that the team was “tired of the killings and the injustice.”

According to sports reporter Jared Weiss, Bucks players also urged the team ownership to take action. One owner put in a call to the Wisconsin state house, and within hours, the governor had issued an executive order calling for a special vote on police reform bills that had been introduced in June.

Two days later, the Movement for Black Lives held a Black National Convention—an addendum to Democratic and Republican national conventions held earlier in the month. In a four-hour virtual event, Black organizers laid out their platform, which includes reparations for slavery, environmental justice, and an end to the “war on Black people.”

Back in Kenosha, Blake’s sister told reporters that she’s watched the police kill so many Black people that she is numb. She hasn’t even cried about her brother’s shooting.

“I don’t want your pity,” she said. “I want change.”