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OP-ED OPINION

# Police need to stop the practice of detaining people on the ground except in extreme cases | COMMENTARY

By LARRY GIBSON  
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FEEDBACK



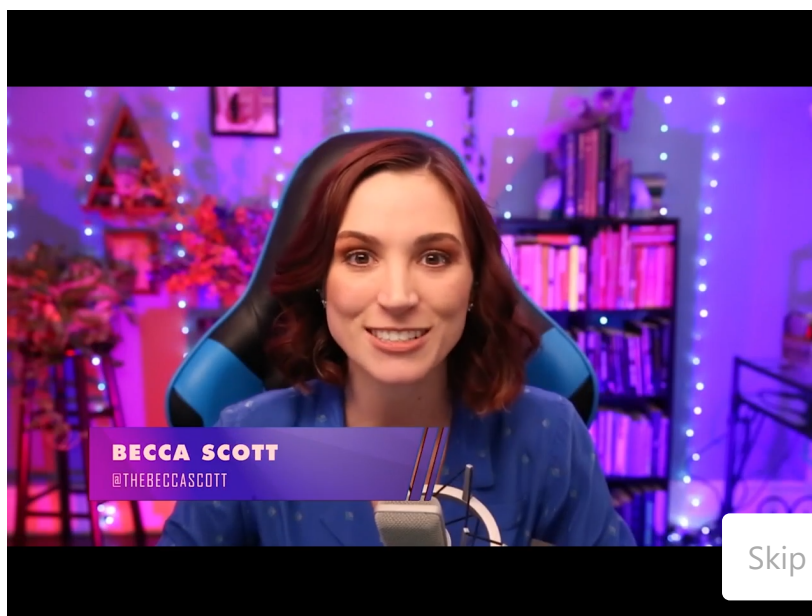
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The recent video of an incident in Aurora, Colorado where police officers forced a 6-year-old girl, her teenage sister, two cousins and an aunt to lay face down on hot asphalt was for me the last straw. It was heart wrenching to hear the child crying and pleading to be moved next to her sister. This family had committed no crimes, but they were victims of police misidentification and an horrendous police practice that must be curtailed by law.

Police officers frequently force people, especially Black men, women and children, to lay prone face down on the ground with their hands cuffed behind their backs. The police do this without knowing, and apparently without caring, whether people have physical or medical conditions that make complying painful or harmful.

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Many people cannot lay on their stomachs without great discomfort, even in their own beds, much less out in the street. Breathing difficulties, obesity, heart disease, muscle tightness, back problems, injuries and other problems can make complying difficult or dangerous. Applying handcuffs and/or pressure to the person compounds the risks.

Sometimes this police practice leads to death. Take what happened to John Elliott

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examiner called it “hypoxic ischemic brain injury due to cardiopulmonary arrest due to positional and compressional asphyxia during prone restraint.” In the video, one can hear Mr. Neville pleading that he could not breathe. His own body smothered him to death.

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Forcing people to the ground often escalates the encounter into a physical struggle, when the frightened citizen panics and squirms as the police officer insists on immediate compliance and interprets the citizen’s response as “resisting arrest.” We have seen too many videos of such struggles leading to tragedy.

Besides being dehumanizing, forcing people to lay face down on the ground is grossly unsanitary. The ground is where virus droplets, saliva, sweat and filth land and accumulate. Who knows what one will touch or inhale while down there?

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Of course, there are circumstances where police have no other reasonable alternative but to restrain a person, perhaps even on the ground. But that should be a last resort, not a standard default procedure. Standing over citizens prone on the ground gives police such a feeling of dominance that they will resist change and legislation will be required to curtail this practice. I suggest enactment of legislation like this:

*A police officer may require a person to lay prone on the ground only when it is objectively reasonable, necessary and proportional to obtain compliance with*

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*lawful commands or resolve a conflict. The police officer must consider any*

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It is understandable that a person would resent the dehumanizing experience of being treated like an animal. For Black people, it is too reminiscent of our images of slavery. Undoubtedly, some people suffer long-term trauma and emotional damage from these encounters.

A final casualty of this police practice is decent community police relations. Many people, particularly minorities, are afraid of the police and distrust their judgment, honesty and ability to be fair. The abuse of unnecessarily forcing them or their family members to lay on the ground exacerbates this fear and distrust. One can only imagine how those four youngsters in Aurora and many others who viewed the video of their ordeal will regard police in the future.

There is no reason to expect that most police officers or their unions will support this reform. If they will not even support banning life-threatening chokeholds, it is hopeless to expect police to support this regulation of their control over people's bodies. Therefore, affirmative legislation, similar to what I propose, will have to be enacted over police objections.

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