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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)

Click Here

[Home](#)

**Black, Male, Released From Prison and Unemployed:
An Equation for Social Estrangement
Between the Lines
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The tragedy of four police officers being shot on a routine traffic stop in Oakland, California, over the weekend, offered a set of circumstances that we all must face up to at some point in our society. Four people died (three officers) and a fourth officer is on life support, and condolences go out to all the families. It is a public tragedy "of monumental proposition," to quote Oakland Mayor, Ron Dellums.

Hidden in the public tragedy is a greater social tragedy, young men who are re-entering society from prison stints that find it increasing difficult to find work and are forced to go underground because they can't find work. While the facts of the Oakland incident are being "investigated," the scenario is not difficult to construct. You have a young black male, recently paroled from prison - to be paroled you must either have work or be actively looking for work - missed his check-in with his parole officer because he couldn't find work and didn't want to be violated (returned to prison), he's violated and now a fugitive on the streets of Oakland, he gets into a confrontation "in the hood" that ends up with an assault with a deadly weapon, a no bail warrant issued for him and he was probably driving without a license and insurance when he was stopped.

The all too familiar line, "Step out of the car, sir" (if it was that polite) is the cue for what comes next. The "routine" encounter turned to panic and the rest is news. This young man, Lovelle Mixon was estranged long before his final estrangement. He represented the worse extreme of prison re-entry; black, male and unemployed with a criminal "strike." It is an equation for the social estrangement for many, many black males.

Just for the record, there is no such thing as a routine encounter when police stop black men. Anything can happen and anything has happened, never matter how passive or professional the black male. When combined with negative stereotypes and egregious emasculation, there is a hyper-sensitivity directed at black men that is, for

less than a better term, hostile. Hostility toward black males is reflected in most social and economic indicators - from high school drops to unemployment rates to lower pay when hired-from most traffic stops to most arrests to longer jail sentences. This hostility heightens the potential for "accidents," as Richard Pryor once said, when police encounter black men, and the reasons for stopping them is frequently highly suspect.

Racial profiling studies bear this out. Recent studies on prisoner re-entry suggest that, in California, nearly 400 prisoners, A DAY, are being released into the community, with 70% to 90% of them being unemployed because only 20% of the state's employers are willing to hire persons with convictions (no matter how long ago). Unemployment rates released last week should that black unemployment was at 12.5% (16% nationally), a full five points over white unemployment at 7.5%. The state unemployment rate is at 10.5%. However, by most estimates black male unemployment is over 20% with one in five black men being out of work. Black teen unemployment was nearly 40% last summer and is expected to be higher this summer.

With black males being only 3.5% of the state's population but nearly 30% of the state prison population, the employment prospects of black male re-entry, are better in prison than outside of prison. Employment is nearly 100% inside the prison industrial complex. The problem is that black men can't live on seven cents an hour on the outside like they can on the inside.

Being unemployed is bad enough. Being unemployable with convictions is social estrangement. Mix that with law enforcement policies that engage racial traffic stops as a form of social control, and eventually the panic we have all felt when lights flash behind us becomes disastrous. Lovelle Mixon, on one hand, is any black man in America who is stopped on any given day. On the other hand, he was part of the social estrangement that left him no options to rationally deal with the hostility he faced in his final law enforcement encounter. In the final analysis, his act now only makes the hostility black men already encounter even more heightened. This will not just go away.

Mixon was on record saying he was not going back to prison. He chose the graveyard instead. The reality here was that his options were few because his circumstances were dire. Mixon saw no way out. It didn't give him the right to take these officers lives, and the real reality here was, once he did what he did he probably knew he would not live through the episode. Cop killers are rarely ever taken into custody. They're usually dead wherever they're found. His act was of desperation. A desperation stemming from a larger black male social estrangement. It's easy to say, "He was just a criminal" As true as that statement is, it is just as true that there is a systemic problem here. Mixon's act was not justified, but his socially estranged reality was real.

Black man are more likely to be treated with extreme hostility and are more frequently put in desperate situations to lose their lives. The question is now, how will this incident cause black males to be perceived in future police stops? Every black man in America may not be a Lovelle Mixon, but can we truly say that every black man will not be treated like Lovelle Mixon?

Or end up like Lovelle Mixon? It's a real dangerous social quandary to ponder.


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[Contents of Issue Menu](#)
Click Here

[Home](#)

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