

March 31, 2023

On Irvo Otieno

–King’Ori Kanyi, Bay Area Kenyan Community Leader

On March 30th, mourners gathered at First Baptist Church in South Richmond, VA to remember the life of 28-year-old Irvo Otieno, who was killed on March 6th at the hands of 7 police officers and 3 staff members of the psychiatric hospital he was being admitted to.

On behalf of the Black communities of Northern California, I wish to convey our heartfelt condolences to his family and community at large. May he transition to our ancestor’s realm in peace.

His tragic death, which in many ways is reminiscent of George Floyd’s death, has left us all reeling and once again raises many serious questions. I would like to use this space to address THREE.

At age 4, Irvo and his family migrated to the US from Kenya, but his mother, Caroline Ouko declared that he was “as American as Apple Pie”. Which brings me to the FIRST question, is an African Migrant an African American?

This question has been asked for a while and if there is something that is clear from Irvo’s tragic death, it is that the police do not make any such distinctions. At your most vulnerable moment, which is often when the police come into your life, you may be judged purely on the basis of your skin color.

I say this, so as to remind you, fellow African migrants, that you have a role to play in making policing safer for all people of color. So, stand in solidarity

with Black Causes in your neighborhood and beyond! Specifically, on issues of police reform.

This is my SECOND question; are the police the best resource to deal with all public safety issues, or have our cities formed a habit of using the police as a sort of Swiss army knife?

As the Rev. Al Sharpton said during Thursday's mass, "...if you were not equipped or trained to deal with the illness, then you should not have shown up to answer the call." This, in my view, is at the heart of the debate around defunding and divesting the police.

In addition, most police academies in the United States require 6 months of instructions to become an officer. Compare that to Japan, Norway, or Finland where a police officer is required to have a 4-year degree in law or other social sciences.

There is room for improvement. And my call is for all of us to familiarize ourselves with the clamor for police reform. Here is an invaluable resource for your reference. <https://nicjr.org/police-transformation-resource-center/>

My FINAL question: Are we addressing mental health issues in African migrant communities?

Prior to Irvo's fatal encounter with the police, he had suffered a mental breakdown, for which his mother was seeking help. In fact, she had sought this kind of intervention for him before, from which he had come home from. I can still affirm that she had done the right thing by seeking help in the midst of a crisis.

In the Bay Area Kenyan community, we are amidst a crisis ourselves, having had at least half a dozen cases of suicide in the last few years that I am aware of. All of whom were youthful members of the community that in many instances came as a surprise to even their closest family members and friends. This tells me that this is a major blind-side for the community

and leaves me wondering whether we are equipped to support those who are suffering from mental illnesses. I know I am not alone.

Let us talk about it. Suicide is the painful tip to this iceberg; what lies underneath it is a myriad of issues including depression, bi-polar disorder, and substance abuse, and the over 300 disorders that affect the human mind.

And so, my final call is to talk about it. Normalize checking in on each other. And if you do not know where to start, here are some excellent resources: <https://aawellnessproject.org/contact/> and www.211.org.

King'ori Kanyi

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