

For Whom Sean Bell Tolls **by Dan Jacoby**

Just over two months ago, a young black man was shot and killed by police officers early in the morning of what was supposed to be his wedding day.

Once again, the questions abounded. Why did the police find it necessary to fire 50 rounds at a car when nobody inside the car was armed? Why wasn't standard police procedure – fire three times and pause – ignored? Who, if anyone, needs to be punished, and how? What procedures and training protocols need to be changed?

But mostly, once again the most significant question was the same: Why, in a city that is still mostly white, are almost all of the victims of police shootings black?

The problem, I think, is not blatant racism on the part of the NYPD. There are racist cops, of course; any group of over 30,000 people is going to have some bad apples. And there are attitude problems that pervade the police force; far too many cops are far too arrogant far too often. But there is no proof that the level or target of racism and bigotry among the police force is any different from society in general.

So why, in a city that is still mostly white, are most of the victims black? It is because of the level of racism that continues to permeate our society at large. It is because we are still, almost 40 years after Dr. King went to the mountaintop, wandering in the desert of inequality, where hopelessness and despair still suffuse significant swaths of society, based to a large extent on race.

It is because a young black man in the United States is still more likely to spend time in prison than earn a college degree. It is because, at a time of extraordinarily (one might say unbelievably) low unemployment rates citywide, the rate for black men is still above depression-era levels. It is because there is still an enormous gap between white America and black America, and that gap is highlighted in large cities such as New York.

We can debate the reasons for the remaining inequality, not just of wealth, but also of opportunity, and how far we have come. We can also debate the question of how to remedy this. Would some version of "affirmative action" in job hiring and college admissions help? How about targeting education budgets to spend more money on schools in poorer neighborhoods and districts? Why not create tax and other incentives for companies to hire people from the ghettos?

The difficult truth is that problem is complex, going back centuries, and it won't be solved overnight. But that does not mean we shouldn't be making every effort to speed up the day when Dr. King's dream is realized. As long as racial inequality exists, we have both an ethical and a practical obligation to work to correct this moral outrage. Because until that happens, young black men in New York City and elsewhere will continue to be victims of police shootings.