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OPINION LEADER ON SUNDAY NANI JANSEN REVENTLOW

The Sammy Baker case once again raises the question: who is protecting us from the police?



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No racialised person needs video footage to know that the police are not there to protect us. Along with [health care](#) and the [social security](#) system, the police work out public functions that pose a significant risk to black people, people of colour and other marginalised groups rather than contributing to their well-being.

When the world united in protests in 2020 after the police killing of George Floyd, I did not watch the video that highlighted this example of racist police brutality from the statistics, something normally ignored by the media and the public. Nor did I watch the footage of the shooting of Sammy Baker, a young Instagram influencer who was shot in a disoriented state by Amsterdam police, three months after Floyd was strangled almost 7,000 km away in the US.

About the author

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Sammy's case was in the news again last week when the VPRO programme *Argos* [discussed the analysis made by the British research group Forensic Architecture](#) of footage of his death. Their analysis contradicts that shooting Sammy was a matter of self-defence, the reason the prosecution gave for not prosecuting the police officers who fired the shots. **Sammy's father is black and Sammy's death illustrates how commonplace racist, deadly police violence is in the Netherlands, where people like to label institutional racism as something that only happens 'over there', in the US.**

The figures tell a different story. **Controle Alt Delete, the only organisation in the Netherlands that keeps these statistics, recorded 97 'fatal incidents' involving the police between 2016 and 2022.** 36 per cent of the victims had a migration background. Even excluding the 54 per cent whose information about their ethnicity was not known, this means that people with a migration background are 11 times more likely to die when they come into contact with the police. [By contrast, for black Americans, this factor is 2.5.](#)

This is all part of a pattern where men from non-Western backgrounds are twice as likely to be checked by the police and young people from migrant backgrounds are twice as likely to be

suspected of a crime as young people from non-migrant backgrounds, with a **10-12 times higher chance** of ending up **in detention**. While white people can of course also experience police violence, statistics show that violent police action is more often used against non-white people who come into contact with the police.

And while suspects with a migration background can count on harsher sentences from the courts and can even be profiled 'preventively', hardly any energy is put into cracking down on misconduct by the police themselves. **Of the average number of complaints the Public Prosecution Service receives annually about the police, 99 per cent are dismissed. Of the 97 recorded cases of fatal police violence, only three led to prosecution.**

The Netherlands thus fits neatly into a European pattern of police brutality against racialised and marginalised groups, which leads the Brussels-based organisation Equinox to ask: 'Who is protecting us from the police?'

The key question we must ask ourselves is: should we maintain a non-liaable apparatus of state violence at all? It is time to face the fact that the police brutality that disproportionately affects people of colour is institutional in nature. It is rooted in police policies, practices and procedures that wrongly portray people from 'non-Western' or migrant backgrounds as people who are 'not one of us' and therefore pose a risk that needs to be managed. Therefore, we cannot reduce the use of deadly police violence to the behaviour of a few 'rotten apples' or 'wrong cops': it is the result of power structures within the police as an institution.

As an institution, the police do not protect people of colour. Statistics and the experiences of racialised and marginalised people in the Netherlands and worldwide show that cases like those of George Floyd, Sammy and countless others are not the result of a fault in the system, but the result of a system designed to oppress poor people, black people and people of colour.

If those responsible for intervening in such obvious abuses – the government and the House of Representatives – do not do so, this system must be scrapped. In this context, it is important to remember that abolitionism does not just mean abolishing something, the police, but creating something new: a process in which together we create safe alternatives to an inhuman system.

The first step on this path is to acknowledge institutional racism, not only within the police, but also within the institutions that should hold the police accountable, including the public prosecutor's office. It should not be necessary to file complaints to convince authorities to look critically at their violent culture and structures, as Sammy's parents had to do. Justice should be inherent in our legal system – if we have to make efforts on an individual basis to achieve that goal, it means the system has failed.