

# "What's Going On?" - Marvin Gaye

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<http://50can.org/what-we-do/blog/whats-going-marvin-gaye>

I didn't write after the Ferguson verdict; mainly because I was not surprised by it. I've spent a lot of time organizing and activating folks in communities of color and that experience left me jaded about their place and impact on the political or justice systems. But the grand jury's failure to indict the officer who put Eric Garner into a chokehold—one that catalyzed his untimely death—was stunning even for someone with enough world and political experience to be a trained cynic like myself.

The truth is that what happened to Eric Garner as he stood on that corner selling loose cigarettes—and no one having the will to advance the justice process on his behalf after he'd been deprived of his life—is “America” working as intended. Indeed, the events are the by-product of two large institutions, the American education system and the criminal justice system, working precisely as intended and with a villainous efficiency. These institutions do two things: turn African American boys, in particular, into tremendous engines of efficient wealth transfer in our society and, after they've been all used up, make them legally disposable.

Consider this: there are lots of young black boys who later become men like Eric Garner sitting in underperforming schools in New York City and across this country. While there, they give the city and the state the right to tax on their behalf so they can, in theory, receive the kind of education that will make them productive and free citizens. Their presence in this instance means, to be blunt, that lots of people get paid whether or not these students are educated. These kids filled the college funds of the children of teachers, even though they never went to college. They pay off the mortgages of administrators even though their parents might rent. They finance the political activity of unions through the dues collected from the teachers charged with educating them though they can't vote. These investments all happened without their knowledge or consent. All of this happens regardless of whether these kids are educated.

These children, overwhelmingly black and brown, are financial assets of the highest order. Despite this, they graduate from high school with limited economic possibilities and, very likely, broken souls. And like many other young black men whose God-given potential has been squandered in schools with long histories of underperformance, they act out in a manner that ultimately becomes criminal. Here we find Garner, who despite being described by his minister as a “gentle giant,” was arrested almost 30 times during his life-cut-short, and more than once for selling loose cigarettes. And while he spent nights in local precincts, and other men like him spent nights in prisons, they again gave the city and the state the right to tax on their behalf. This time, however, it was not for his or their own freedom or safety, but for the ostensible freedom and safety of others. According to Pew, in 2010 black men were six times as likely to be incarcerated as white men. In New York City it costs \$167,000 a year to keep a person jailed. The average corrections officer with 10 years on the job makes \$60,000 annually.

It's also worth noting that when these once-young black boys with all the potential in the world—who are now broken and poorly educated men—are at last turned out into the world, they return to the only neighborhoods they knew where they then turn on each other. They have become disposable. Which brings me to Eric Garner and his fateful and last interaction with the justice system on a sunny corner, on a summer day, on Staten Island.

Eric Garner was selling loose cigarettes when he was approached by the police. My aunt used to call these "loosies" when I was a kid and she would send me across Woodyear Street in Baltimore to Ms. Loo's store to get her a stray Newport. The point of a "loosie" is that you buy one when you can't afford a whole pack of cigarettes. Buying a loosie is something you do at 2 a.m. when a bar closes or, more importantly, something you do when you need a cigarette and you can only afford to buy one. A loosie is like layaway for a pack of smokes. Put another way, you buy a loosie when you don't have a lot of money.

You sell loose cigarettes because you have to, not because you want to. And more specifically, because your economic circumstances force

you to. You sell them when you don't have the education or the opportunity—exclusive of the will— necessary to do something else. Now consider Garner, approached yet again by the police, rightly or wrongly, who were trying to stop him from feeding his family with limited economic tools at his disposal. He got upset. He'd been there before. He didn't have the social or financial capacity to protect himself in a way that wasn't driven by the profound injustice of all of this. And that's when he felt the arm around his throat. The knee on his neck. And the last bit of oxygen in his lungs.

When his wife received the grand jury verdict months later, all that was affirmed was that Garner had "done his part." At the end, he was used up and empty. All the wealth drained from him. He was black. He was male. He was disposable. I don't write this to say the world is filled with terrible teachers or predatory police. I write it to say that the articulation between these two institutions—underperforming schools that incidentally are overwhelmingly segregated and a prison and criminal justice system that mirrors that same segregation—works with dizzying efficiency. The result is economically beneficial to many people and equally destructive to many others, Eric Garner being the most recent, and among the best, examples of this phenomenon.

The incentives here are powerful, and powerful incentives are, without a doubt, the most difficult to change. Our kids are dying but the system is working for the people who profit from it. As I write this, many are physically or civically having their potential choked out of them while the status quo struts and frets over "how much" change there should be to our education system. Or "how fast." Or "who should" be the agent of that change. In a world of millions of potential Eric Garners, we must find the will to do everything in our means to educate our kids. It is the best thing we can do to make them free—it's also the best thing we can do to keep them alive.