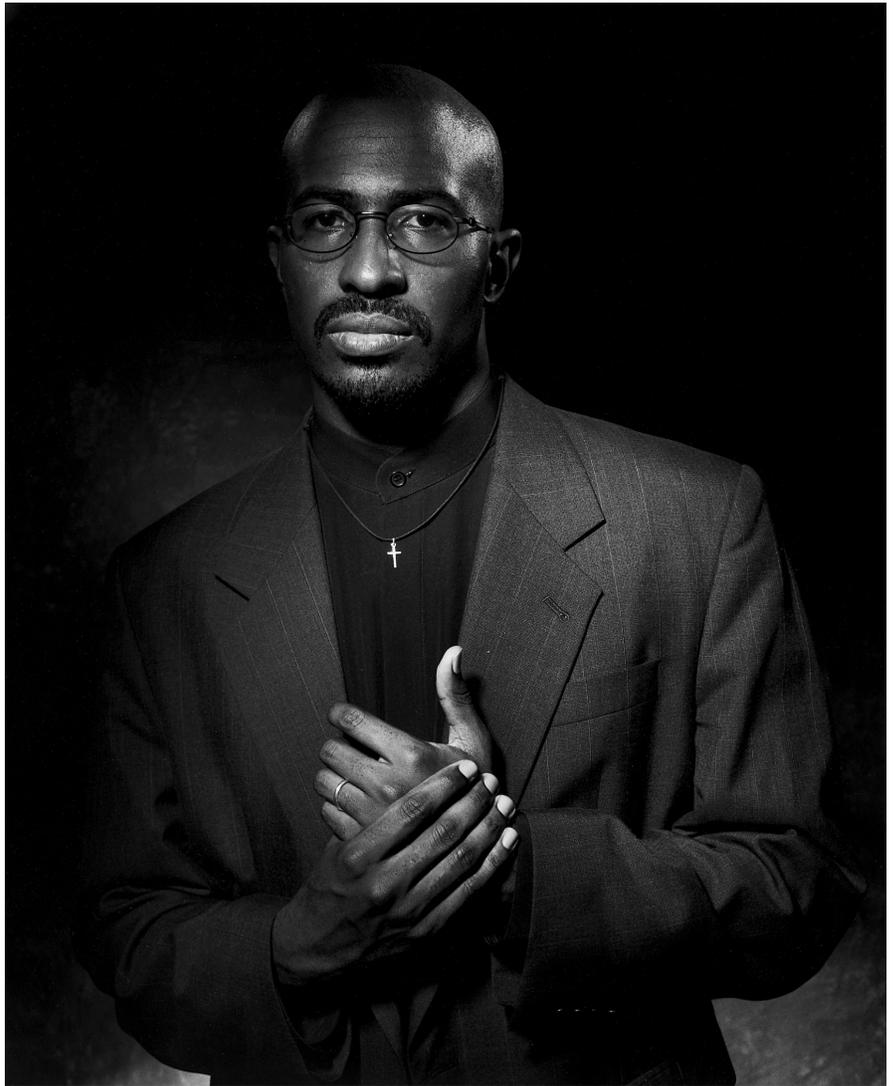


# VAN JONES

---

Van Jones is the founding director of the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights. Founded in 1996 and named for an unsung civil rights heroine, the Center challenges human rights abuses in the U.S. criminal justice system. A project of the Ella Baker Center, Bay Area Police Watch is committed to stopping police misconduct and protecting victims of abuse. Police Watch takes a multifaceted approach, combining advocacy with public education and community organizing. Staff work directly with individuals who have suffered police harassment, intimidation, and brutality. Jones's efforts to establish civilian oversight, and to require transparency and accountability within disciplinary proceedings, have yielded results. Jones's efforts to ban the use of pepper spray, routinely used by police in subduing suspects, has helped launch a nationwide campaign against the chemical weapon. The Police Watch Hotline documents callers' complaints and refers victims to lawyers who are, in turn, trained by Police Watch in handling misconduct cases. Police Watch then helps victims and lawyers through legal proceedings, organizes community support, and advocates on behalf of victims to public officials and the media. These significant achievements have offered a corrective lesson that egregious abuses of human rights still take place even within the vaunted protection offered by the democratic laws of the United States. Jones is the author of *The Green Collar Economy*, the definitive book on "green jobs." In 2008—thanks to a low-cost, viral marketing campaign—his book became an instant *New York Times* bestseller. Jones helped to pass America's first "green job training" legislation, the Green Jobs Act, which George W. Bush signed into law as a part of the 2007 Energy Bill. He is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the Reebok International Human Rights Award; the World Economic Forum's Young Global Leader designation; and the prestigious, international Ashoka Fellowship. Jones was included in the *Ebony* magazine "Power 150" list of most influential African-Americans for 2009. In 2008, *Essence* magazine named him one of the 25 most inspiring/influential African Americans. *TIME* magazine named him an environmental hero in 2008. In 2009, *TIME* named him one of the 100 most influential people in the world. From March to September 2009, Jones worked as the special adviser for green jobs at the White House Council for Environmental Quality and is currently a political correspondent on CNN.



Van Jones, ©2000 Eddie Adams

“A GUY IS BEATEN, HE’S KICKED, HE’S STOMPED, HE’S PEPPER-SPRAYED, GAGGED (BECAUSE THE POLICE DIDN’T WANT HIM BLEEDING ON THEM), AND THEN LEFT IN A CELL. WELL, THAT’S THE SORT OF STUFF YOU EXPECT IN GUATEMALA, BUT IT HAPPENED JUST FIFTEEN OR TWENTY MINUTES FROM HERE.”

---

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights is a strategy center for documenting and exposing human rights violations in the United States—particularly those perpetuated by law enforcement. A project of the Center, Bay Area Police Watch has a hotline that opened in 1995 here in the San Francisco Bay area and in 1998 in New York City where people can call and report abuses. We designed a computer database, the first of its kind in the country, that allows us to track problem officers, problem precincts, problem practices, so at the click of a mouse we can now identify trouble spots and troublemakers. This has given us a tremendous advantage in trying to understand the scope and scale of the problem. Now, obviously, just because somebody calls and says, “Officer so-and-so did something to me,” doesn’t mean it actually happened, but if you get two, four, six phone calls about the same officer, then you begin to see a pattern. It gives you a chance to try and take affirmative steps.

We also try to expose abuse by doing a lot of public education. This is something we’ve really pioneered. Sometimes when people who suffered abuse at the hands of the police tried to engage the mainstream media, they would do it in a way that made them seem shrill, alarmist, or racially divisive. Instead, we thought it was important to interact intelligently with the media in a way that let them know that we were credible and interested in moving this issue forward in a responsible way.

Look, we get ten phone calls a day here from survivors of police misconduct and violence. Some of it is, “Officer so-and-so called me a boogerhead,” or something minor like that, but it also goes as far as wrongful death. We see the full gamut here. We try to spend half an hour to an hour with every person who calls. We have people who call because their children have come home with a broken arm or broken jaw or their teeth shattered or because the child has been held in jail for four or five days with no charges. What we do when people call is that we let them tell their story and then we write the story into the computer. We don’t try to rush them.

Then we tell them about their rights and their remedies. We tell them if you want to file a complaint with this officer in this municipality, here’s the number you call, here’s how to get the form to fill out, here’s the process. We tell them if you want to bring a lawsuit or file a claim of some sort for money damages, here’s what that process looks like.

If a caller has evidence of police brutality, then we have a couple dozen cooperating attorneys that we refer those cases to. Those attorneys rely on us to screen to a certain extent—to ask enough questions about the incidents so that if somebody calls and says, “Police Watch told me to call,” then they can be relatively confident that there’s at least something to work with here.

We started out in January 1995 at the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights. Even though police issues were not a part of their docket (they usually focus on employment, discrimination, and other issues), they saw a need.

That need became clear, after we had been doing this project for a while, in the Aaron Williams case. This was the African-American man who died in police custody. We had a really close relationship to the process. Sometimes you have to have a certain amount of professional distance, but this case was not like that at all. Here the family and Police Watch volunteers merged efforts and spent those two years literally arm-in-arm. We went through three separate disciplinary hearings for the same officer on the same case within eight months, and we lost the first two times and we finally won in 1997. I’ll never forget the look on the officer’s face. It had gone beyond Aaron. This case became a question of not letting the authorities get away with this level of wholesale disrespect and disregard for human life and for the rule of law. Community witnesses, several dozen of them, all said that after Aaron was down on the ground and handcuffed, the policeman was kicking him in the head with cowboy boots, and that he was identifiable because he was the only officer in plainclothes.

Aaron had been sprayed in the face with pepper-spray, which is not a gas, like mace—it’s a resin. The resin sticks to your skin and it burns and it continues to burn until it’s washed off. The police never washed the resin off Aaron. And so this guy is beaten, he’s kicked, he’s stomped, he’s pepper-sprayed, gagged (because they didn’t want him bleeding on them), and then left in a cell. Well, that’s the sort of stuff you expect in Guatemala, but it happened just fifteen or twenty minutes from here.

All of this was illegal and inhumane and yet it was going to be sloughed under the rug. This case was definitely a turning point in my life. I knew what kind of officer this was; I knew what the family was going through and I just made a commitment inside myself that I was not going to walk away. . Win or lose, this family was not going to fight by itself. Every resource that I had, every bit of creativity that I had, all of the training in criminal law and community organizing that I had, I was going to put to work until we got justice.

As a result, I began to get threats. “Who do you think is protecting you?” or if something were to happen to you, talking about “People like you don’t deserve to live”; “People like you don’t deserve to be in this city.” It just went on and on.

But 99 percent of the cases don’t end as dramatically as Williams’s. We have this one African-American father who bought a sports car for his son. On the boy’s sixteenth birthday, he was driving him home in this new sports car and the police pulled him over—two black guys in a sports car. Now they put them on the hood of the car, they frisked them, they went all through the car. There was no physical violence but the guy wound up with a severe emotional and nervous breakdown. Small business went under. He just couldn’t recover from it because he was so humiliated in front of his son.

My point is that this sort of stuff just shouldn’t be happening. It doesn’t make our world any safer, doesn’t make law enforcement’s job any easier. It increases the level of resentment against law enforcement. And it’s plain just wrong.

# “WHO DO YOU THINK IS PROTECTING YOU?”

VAN JONES

LESSON GRADE LEVEL: 9–12, AND HIGHER EDUCATION  
HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUES: JUSTICE, FAIR TREATMENT

## UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

**Article 3:** Right to Life, Liberty and Personal Security

**Article 5:** Freedom from Torture and Degrading Treatment

**Article 6:** Right to Recognition as a Person before the Law

**Article 7:** Right to Equality before the Law

**Article 9:** Freedom from Arbitrary Arrest and Exile

## GUIDING QUESTIONS:

- What role does law enforcement play in society?
- What responsibility does the media, in its many forms, have to the larger society?
- What mechanisms or institutions are in place to provide oversight of law enforcement agencies?
- What can we learn about real priorities by reviewing approved budgets?

**TIME REQUIREMENT:** 120 minutes

## OBJECTIVES:

After this lesson, students will:

- Know who Van Jones is and why he is a human rights defender.
- Understand the issue of police brutality within the U.S. and internationally.
- Understand the impact media has in advancing a position or perspective on an issue.
- Understand the connection between policies and financing policy positions.
- Examine the roles of oppression and repression and police brutality.

## COMMON CORE LEARNING STANDARDS:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-10.4
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.9-10.9
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.7
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.WHST.11-12.9

## VOCABULARY:

Inhumane

Impunity

Intimidation

Racial profiling

Misconduct

Brutality

## CONCEPTS:

Justice

Civil rights

Human rights

Equal protection

Police misconduct

Racial profiling

## TECHNOLOGY REQUIRED:

Internet access

## MATERIALS:

- Interview with Van Jones from *Speak Truth To Power* [www.rfkhumanrights.org](http://www.rfkhumanrights.org) / click on **Speak Truth to Power** / click on **“Defenders”** tab  
Click on *Speak Truth to Power* / click on **“Defenders”** tab
- *Lessons from a Killing* by Van Jones  
<http://brasscheck.com/cm/jones.html>

## STUDENT ACTIVITIES

---

**NOTE TO TEACHERS:** Discuss with students the difficulties of being a police officer to better understand the officer's perspective. The role of an officer needs to be presented before the issue of police brutality is discussed.

### ANTICIPATORY SET:

- Instruct students to read the Van Jones interview from *Speak Truth To Power* and to read the article *Lessons from a Killing*.
- Ask students to respond to the following questions:
  - What is excessive force? Is there a base standard or is it situational?
  - The Aaron Williams case happened 15 years ago. Do you think the situation has changed? Explain.
  - Identify three strategies regarding work with the media that Van Jones implemented in order to achieve justice for Aaron Williams.
  - Did Van Jones believe all police to be racist?

### ACTIVITY 1:

Split the class into two groups. One group will be given a case of police abuse in the U.S. and the other group will be given an international case. (If time permits, have students research and then select the case they will work on.)

- Ask the students to examine the following four aspects of the case:
  - How was the case covered by the media? Be sure to review at least two print media sources and at least three online sources. Ask students to highlight key differences in reporting the case.
  - Identify the primary and secondary players in the case. Did the case stay within the established law enforcement and judicial systems? Did community organizations get involved?
  - What legal framework did the prosecution and defense use to try their cases? Did they reference state, provincial, national, federal and/or international law? Which ones?
  - How was the case resolved? What was the response of primary and secondary players? Did the outcome of the case generate more interest or coverage than the initial case? If so, how?

### ACTIVITY 2:

- Have each group present its findings to the class.
- On the board or interactive whiteboard note the similarities and differences between how the U.S. and the international case were handled.
- Have the class discuss the joint findings guided by the following questions:
  - Was justice served? Explain.
  - What should have been done differently by:
    - Defendant**
    - Prosecution**
    - Community support groups**
    - Media**
- Have the class draw final conclusions about the prevalence of police brutality and how it should be addressed.
- Their conclusion should lead to an action plan to bring the issue of police brutality to public awareness.

### ACTIVITY 3:

- Frame the class for students by explaining the connection among campaign promises or statements made to the media, advancing and passing policies and advancing and passing a budget to fully support policy implementation.
- Ask students to select a state, making sure that there is geographic diversity.
- Have students research their selected state's budget. Specifically, have students focus on the following budget lines:
  - Education
  - Law enforcement
  - Justice system
  - Prison system
  - Social services
- After the budget analysis, ask the students to research websites that will provide information on incarcerated men, women and youths.
- Once the websites have been identified, instruct students to find the following information:
  - The incarceration rate for all populations and ages in the United States
  - Graduation rates for incarcerated youths
  - The number of incarcerated people who complete a GED program and earn a GED
  - Unemployment rates for incarcerated populations prior to their arrest
- Have students report their findings to the class.
- As a class, discuss the findings and any inferences that can be made. Students' conclusions should lead to an action directed at allocation of resources at the state and federal level.

## BECOME A DEFENDER

- While it is important to trust what is within the news, it is much more difficult to discover what is truly going on, especially when you are investigating law enforcers. Interview known victims, friends and family of victims, and even the police force to hear the official accounts and what is not being reported by the government or media.
- Invite members of local law enforcement agencies—local police, county sheriffs, state police—to your class to talk about what the job of being a police officer entails and what training officers have to prevent excessive use of force.
- Discuss and debate your and your classmates' perceptions of police brutality compared with what is in the law, what is portrayed in the media, and by the government. Do they align with each other? Compile stories of local, national and international police brutality and argue the pros and cons of the case. Do you believe that the amount of force was merited?
- If there has been a specific instance of police brutality in your area, prepare materials for a teach-in at your school to inform students and teachers about police brutality and how to work with the local police force to end it. This information can also be shared with civic and community organizations.
- Research the United States' official position on police brutality. What actions does the U.S. Department of Justice take against law enforcement agencies that violate U.S. laws on police brutality?
- Research United States Supreme Court decisions on cases dealing with police brutality. Create a timeline of cases and their outcomes. Prepare a report for your class on the cases and outcomes.
- Contact organizations within the United States that work to eliminate police brutality. Find out what you can do to help end brutality and organize a branch of that organization locally.
- Write to a federal official and file a complaint if you believe that what you have seen, heard, read, or experienced is a form of police brutality.
- Find out what the state of police brutality is in other nations, whether they are democracies, dictatorships, conflict zones, or peace-keeping nations. Countries must work together to reduce excessive force by law enforcement worldwide. Prepare materials to present to your class and civic and community organizations on the background of these abuses and what actions can be taken to end such activities in these countries.
- Write to the United Nations Human Rights Council citing reasons to end global abuses of law enforcement.
- Research international organizations dedicated to ending police brutality and volunteer to work on their cause.



Rally demanding justice for the police killing of Anthony Baez, Bronx, photo by Kirk Condyles/Impact Visuals, copyright ©1995

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Van Jones website:

<http://vanjones.net/>

A website dedicated to the initiatives of Van Jones that includes resources for students and volunteers to get involved.

### Ella Baker Center for Human Rights:

<http://www.ellabakercenter.org/page.php?pageid=1>

### United Nations Home Page:

<http://www.un.org/en/>

The Ella Baker Center for Human Rights provides a number of opportunities for activism both through local and national programs.

### Mostly Water:

<http://mostlywater.org/>

Canadian and international organization dedicated to fighting human rights abuses, including police brutality

### Communities United against Police Brutality:

<http://www.cuapb.org/>

A non-profit organization that works to enact legislative change to prevent police brutality and support the victims of police brutality in Minnesota

### Police Crimes:

[PoliceCrimes.com](http://PoliceCrimes.com)

This website dedicated to raising awareness of cases of police brutality provides a forum for the discussion of crimes committed by police officers , as well as police ethics fact sheets.

### “Pickets, Riots & Police Beatings—the 2004 Republican National Convention in New York City:”

<http://www.vimeo.com/7104734>

An hour-long documentary on police repression and brutality from the 2004 protests during the RNC in New York

### Stop Police Brutality:

<http://www.policebrutality.info/>

Website detailing the latest police brutality cases, including articles, photos, videos and more

### Detroit Coalition Against Police Brutality:

<http://www.detroitcoalition.org/about/>

A non-profit organized to help prevent police brutality by strengthening the communities of Detroit

### Stop and Frisk Report

<https://ccrjustice.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/08/the-human-impact-report.pdf>

This report documents some of the stories behind the staggering statistics behind aggressive stop-and-frisk practices, and sheds new light on the breadth of impact this policy is having on individuals and groups, in neighborhoods, and citywide.

©1990 T.L. Litt/Impact Visuals

