

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

June 7, 2012

The Honorable Eric Holder
Attorney General of the United States
U.S. Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20530

Re: Racial Disparities in Application of Stand Your Ground Defense

Dear Mr. Holder:

We write to request an investigation into the racial disparities of so-called "Stand Your Ground" laws. These laws are dangerous and unnecessary expansions of self defense laws that allow armed individuals to confront an unarmed person in public, and shoot to kill even if the confrontation could be safely avoided. Ten years ago, these laws were basically unknown. The laws have since proliferated with the support of outside organizations like the American Legislative Exchange Council and the National Rifle Association, and 24 states have now enacted them. Since Florida enacted its law in 2005, claims of justifiable homicide have tripled.

In addition to making our communities less safe, there is troubling anecdotal evidence of racial disparity in the application of these laws. As you know, a black teenager named Trayvon Martin was fatally shot in Sanford, Florida. Because of Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, local police were unable to immediately arrest the man that shot Trayvon. Only after community leaders and people around the world expressed outrage did an arrest occur. We sincerely appreciate the Department of Justice's decision to investigate this incident.

Also in Florida, an African American woman and domestic violence victim, Marissa Alexander, was sentenced this month to twenty years in state prison for firing a warning shot as her abusive husband approached. She invoked a defense under Florida's "Stand Your Ground" law, but the court denied use of the defense.

Given these disturbing situations, we call for the Department of Justice to study the racial disparities in the application of these laws.

Sincerely,


Corrine Brown
Member of Congress


Keith Ellison
Member of Congress