

Black **IN AMERICA**

Hal Marcovitz



BIAS IN AMERICA



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Victimized by Police

Michael Brown would never have been regarded as an angel. On the morning of August 9, 2014, Brown, an eighteen-year-old black man from Ferguson, Missouri, entered a convenience store in the St. Louis suburb, where he is alleged to have shoplifted a package of small cigars. Moreover, a security camera captured the image of Brown shoving a clerk on his way out of the store.

A few minutes later, as Brown and another young black man, twenty-two-year-old Dorian Johnson, walked down the center of Canfield Drive in Ferguson, a police cruiser pulled alongside of them. The officer, Darren Wilson, had been summoned to the scene by the Ferguson police dispatcher, who had reported a theft in progress at the convenience store. Wilson, who is white, suspected Brown and Johnson of participating in the theft.

Wilson told Brown and Johnson to get out of the street and use the sidewalk. According to Wilson, as he tried to open the door of his cruiser Brown threw a punch at him and reached for his gun. A struggle ensued. Wilson was able to wrestle the gun away from Brown and fire two shots, one of which hit Brown in the hand. Brown then ran away. Wilson gave chase. Suddenly, Wilson said, Brown turned and charged toward him. Wilson fired his gun again—

releasing twelve shots at Brown, six of which hit the young man. Two shots struck Brown in the head, killing him instantly. Later, when investigators interviewed witnesses, they were told a much different story: that Brown had raised his hands in an effort to surrender to Wilson, but the police officer nevertheless fired at the unarmed man.

Brown's death was not a unique circumstance. For decades, black people—particularly young black men—have found themselves under suspicion by police even though they may be entirely innocent. And in many cases, police have resorted to violent means to apprehend these black suspects, often shooting them with little or no provocation.

That Brown was suspected of shoplifting—a minor crime that rarely results in jail time—is undisputed. The outcome of this incident is what led to a wave of angry protest. Most

A protester holds up a sign in memory of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown. In 2014, Brown was shot and killed by a white police officer even though witnesses say that Brown tried to surrender.



people would agree that losing one's life over some stolen cigars is hardly a fitting punishment. Making matters worse, the Brown shooting is not an isolated event. Other police shootings involving unarmed black men have occurred in the years since the Brown incident. Says Jennifer Cobbina, a professor at the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice,

These killings . . . are hardly outliers. Rather, they are examples of racial hostility, racial bias, legalized racial subordination, and a normative police practice that targets black individuals. But the issue of racially motivated police killings is not simply a product of individual discriminatory police officers. It is the result of deep historical forces that follow a pattern of social control over black people that is entwined in the very fabric of the United States.¹¹

Young Black Men Are Often Victims

Police shootings in America are not uncommon. According to the science journal *Nature*, police in America fire fatal shots at suspects about three times a day. Moreover, studies have shown that in American communities, black people are fatally targeted by police far more often than white people.

“These killings . . . are hardly outliers. Rather, they are examples of racial hostility, racial bias, legalized racial subordination, and a normative police practice that targets black individuals.”¹¹

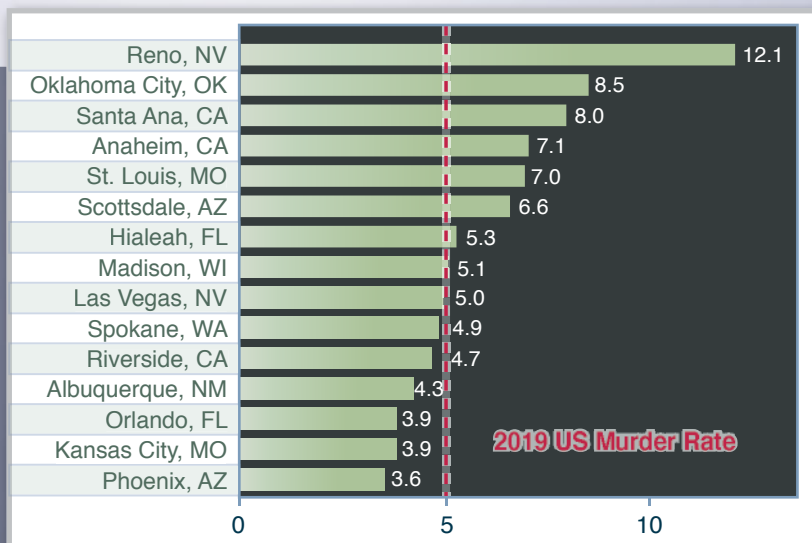
—Jennifer Cobbina, professor at the Michigan State University School of Criminal Justice

For example, statistics compiled by the group Mapping Police Violence reported that of the 1,143 Americans who were killed in police shootings in 2018, 23 percent were black, even though black people make up just 13 percent of the American population. Moreover, the group reported that 21 percent of black victims of fatal police shootings were unarmed, compared to 14 percent of white victims.

Those are national statistics, but when the group looked at large cities—places

Police Killings of African American Men

The rate of police killings of African American men exceeds the US murder rate in eight big-city police departments. This is the finding of the group Mapping Police Violence, which compiled statistics from the nation's one hundred largest city police departments for the years 2013 to 2019. The study found that black men are in the most danger of being shot by police in Reno, Nevada; Oklahoma City, Oklahoma; and Santa Ana, California.



Police Killings of Black Men per 100,000 People, 2013–2019

Source: Mapping Police Violence, April 1, 2020. <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org>.

which typically feature large concentrations of black residents—the numbers show an even greater prominence of black victims. In the one hundred largest American cities, the group found, black people accounted for 38 percent of the victims of police shootings, even though they represented just 21 percent of the populations in those cities. In other words, in the nation's largest cities, black people are killed at nearly twice the rate of nonblack people in police shootings as nonblack people.

A separate study, published in 2019 in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, found that one in one thousand African American boys and men will die in a police

shooting. “That 1-in-1,000 number struck us as quite high,” said study leader Frank Edwards, a sociologist at Rutgers University in New Jersey. “That’s better odds of being killed by police than you have of winning a lot of scratch-off lottery games.”¹² In fact, the study found, black men face a higher risk of dying from being shot by police officers than they do from succumbing to such diseases as diabetes, pneumonia, and the flu.

The study found that young black men are two and a half times more likely to be shot by police than young men of other races. Moreover, study findings show that police shootings are the cause of death for 1.6 percent of all young black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-four. “That’s quite meaningful,” said Justin Feldman, a physician at the New York University School of Medicine who studies causes of death among social classes. “If it’s not you being killed by police, it’s someone you know or someone in your community.”¹³

Lack of Higher Education a Factor

Sociologists and other scholars have studied why police officers are more likely to shoot black people, and many agree with Cobbina—that the reason can be traced to America’s racist past. As far back as 1944, the topic of police violence against black people raised the interest of Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, who specifically studied police violence against black people in southern states. He wrote, “The average southern policeman is a promoted white with a legal sanction to use a weapon. His social heritage has taught him to despise the [blacks], and he has had little education which could have changed him. . . . The result is that probably no group of whites in America have a lower opinion and are more fixed in their views than southern policemen.”¹⁴

Myrdal studied the issue more than seventy-five years ago, but modern scholars find that attitudes in many twenty-first-century police departments aren’t that much different than they were in the 1940s. Write sociologists Cassandra Chaney and Ray V. Robertson, “The current research does corroborate [Myrdal’s] obser-

The Talk

Black parents often find it necessary to have a discussion with their children—particularly their sons—on how to respond if they are approached by white police officers. Black parents have taken to calling this conversation “The Talk.”

Says Judy Belk, the mother of two African American sons,

You know, the [talk] where we remind our young men and women that when they leave the safety of their homes, they have to keep their guard up, mouths shut, and hands on the wheel in even the most casual encounters with law enforcement. It's an unfair but necessary burden we carry in the black community, one we reluctantly pass down to our children if we want to keep them alive and safe.

In recent years, civil rights organizations and other groups have held workshops in black communities advising parents on how to have this conversation with their children. Among these groups are the Washington, DC–based Jack and Jill of America, the New York City–based All Stars Project Inc., and the Alexandria, Virginia–based National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE). Speaking in 2019, Perry Tarrant, the assistant police chief in Seattle, Washington, said, “NOBLE has been inundated with a number of requests for this program. We’ve done it somewhere in the thousands, I believe somewhere around 2,000 times over, just within the last three years.”

Judy Belk, “Opinion: As a Black Parent, I Need to Update ‘The Talk’ I Have with My Kids About Police,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 2019. www.latimes.com.

Quoted in Candace Smith and Alexa Valiente, “Workshops Help Parents Have ‘The Talk’ with Kids on What It Means to Be Black in the US,” ABC News, January 16, 2018. <https://abcnews.go.com>.

ventions that less educated police officers tend to be the most aggressive and have the most formal complaints filed against them when compared to their more educated counterparts.”¹⁵

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, most police departments in the United States require job candidates to be no more than high school graduates or, if they have dropped out

of high school, to have earned a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). However, many four-year colleges as well as two-year community colleges offer degrees in law enforcement, and candidates with college degrees are often given preference for jobs with police departments. Still, according to the National Police Foundation, an Arlington, Virginia, group that studies trends in law enforcement, about half of American police officers lack degrees from either four-year or two-year colleges. In 2014, one of those officers who lacked post-high-school education was Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot Michael Brown.

Willing to Draw Their Weapons

While the educational backgrounds of the officers may be one factor in why police are more likely to shoot blacks than whites, the overriding factor in why black people are targeted so often by police is racial bias. A 2005 study at Florida State University looked at how police respond to suspicious persons. Fifty police officers participated in the study: 84 percent were white, 10 per-



Police officers search a young black man in San Francisco. Studies have shown that police officers hold long-entrenched biases against black people. This bias can create expectations that black people are more likely than white people to be violent criminals.

cent were black, and the remainder were Native American and Hispanic. The officers were shown computer simulations of people and were told some of them are carrying guns. Others carried nonthreatening objects, such as wallets or cell phones. The police officers were instructed to press a key on their keyboards to simulate firing their weapons at people whom they regarded as dangerous—in other words, suspects armed with guns.

The results were clear: The police officers who participated in the study were far more likely to fire their weapons at black men—even those carrying cell phones or wallets—than they were at white individuals. “The officers were . . . more likely to mistakenly shoot unarmed black suspects than unarmed white suspects,” wrote psychologists E. Ashby Plant and B. Michelle Peruche, authors of the study. “These findings are troubling because racial biases in officers’ response to criminal suspects could have tragic implications if such biases generalize to real-life decisions.”¹⁶

In their study, Plant and Peruche concluded that police officers hold long-entrenched biases against black people—that they consider them aggressive and their behavior often criminal. Wrote Plant and Peruche, “This stereotype may create expectations that black people, and particularly black men, are more likely than white people to be violent criminals, which may lead to racially biased interpretations of suspects’ behavior.”¹⁷

Explicit Racial Bias in Ferguson

In the Ferguson case, Wilson insisted that his decision to shoot Brown was not racially motivated—that he felt his life was in danger when Brown charged him. In fact, Wilson said, when he joined the Ferguson police he realized that as a white man he would have trouble relating to the mostly black residents of the Missouri community, and he sought counsel from other police officers who helped him find common ground with the black citizens. Wilson

“The officers were . . . more likely to mistakenly shoot unarmed black suspects than unarmed white suspects.”¹⁶

—E. Ashby Plant and B. Michelle Peruche, psychologists

said he thought he was making progress when the Brown shooting occurred. “I liked the black community,” he said. “I had fun there. . . . There’s people who will just crack you up.”¹⁸

Four months after the shooting of Brown, Wilson was exonerated of any wrongdoing. Prosecutors presented the case to a grand jury, an investigative body composed of citizens chosen to hear the evidence. After examining the evidence and hearing testimony from witnesses, the grand jury decided not to charge Wilson with a crime. Wilson did, however, resign from the Ferguson Police Department.

“I liked the black community. I had fun there.”¹⁸

—Darren Wilson, former Ferguson police officer

In March 2015, the US Justice Department issued its own report on the shooting of Brown, leveling heavy criticism at the Ferguson police—finding the department rife with racial bias toward black citizens.

Among the findings of the report: almost 90 percent of unnecessary force was directed at African Americans; the use of police dogs was exclusively reserved for African Americans; and 90 percent of stops and arrests for reasons as minor as jaywalking—illegally walking in streets—involved black citizens. In announcing the findings of the Justice Department report, US Attorney General Eric Holder said, “These policing practices disproportionately harm African American residents. In fact, our review of the evidence found no alternative explanation for the disproportionate impact on African American residents other than implicit and explicit racial bias.”¹⁹

Police Officers Face Justice

Brown was certainly not the first African American to be the victim of excessive police force. Nor was he the last. After Brown’s death, other members of black communities—frequently young men—have been killed by police. As with Wilson, some of those police officers have been exonerated after investigations into the circumstances surrounding their cases. In other instances, however, prosecutors have found reason to criminally charge the police officers who fired the fatal shots.

Introduction: Some Ugly Truths

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2. Krause, “Ex-Firefighter.”
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5. Glenn C. Loury, “An American Tragedy: The Legacy of Slavery Lingers in Our Cities’ Ghettos,” Brookings Institution, March 1, 1998. www.brookings.edu.
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8. Quoted in William H. Chafe, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*. New York: New Press, 2014, p. 8.
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10. Quoted in Steven D. Farough, “Rebuilding or Reloading,” in *American Identity in the Age of Obama*, Amílcar Antonio Barreto and Richard L. O’Bryant, eds. New York: Routledge, 2014, p. 152.

ORGANIZATIONS AND WEBSITES

Black Lives Matter—<https://blacklivesmatter.com>

Black Lives Matter organizes community action against violence inflicted against black citizens by police. The group also raises campaign funds for candidates dedicated to ending police violence against African Americans. The website includes a link to contact information for chapters found throughout the country.

Campaign for Black Male Achievement

www.blackmaleachievement.org

The New York City-based organization conducts programs to encourage black teens to finish school and begin productive careers. One program encourages successful black men to become mentors to urban teens. By accessing the “community” link on the group’s website, visitors can see a city-by-city guide assessing how active African American men are in mentoring teens.

Federal Bureau of Investigation

www.fbi.gov/services/cjis/ucr/hate-crime

Maintained by the federal government’s chief law enforcement agency, the website tracks hate crimes dating back to 1996. Hate crimes are offenses targeted at victims because of their race, faith, ethnicity, or gender preference. Visitors can find data on the crimes and victims by accessing the link for Hate Crime Statistics Annual Reports.

Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia

www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/what.htm

Maintained by Ferris State University in Michigan, the museum features exhibits highlighting the Jim Crow era in Ameri-

FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Books

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