

They Said It...

QUESTION

“A jury will decide whether that police officer was justified, but it plays straight to the fears of many African American men that their lives are cheap. Is that perception or... is it reality?”

Democratic presidential debate (1/17/16)
MODERATOR

“It’s reality, and it has been heartbreaking, and incredibly outraging to see the constant stories of young men like Walter Scott... who have been killed by police officers. There needs to be a concerted effort to address the systemic racism in our criminal justice system.”¹

ANSWER

Democratic presidential debate (1/17/16)
HILLARY CLINTON

Reality Check

“Law enforcement could end all use of lethal force tomorrow, and it would have, at most, a negligible effect on the black death-by-homicide rate, which is driven overwhelmingly by murders committed by other black civilians.”

Heather Mac Donald, Senior Fellow,
Manhattan Institute



Violent Criminals, Not the Police, Pose the Real Threat to African-Americans

Heather Mac Donald

In Reality

The Black Lives Matter movement and other critics of law enforcement contend that the police routinely shoot black civilians. Despite several highly publicized police killings of African-Americans, the evidence does not support the conclusion that American police are waging a racist war against blacks. In fact, the real threat to black communities is from violent criminals, who are disproportionately black. Deadly incidents between the police and blacks occur at considerably lower rates than one might expect, given the rate of black crime. Police are responsible for a much smaller share of homicides among African-Americans than among homicide victims of other races.

Key Findings

- Police shootings account for a much smaller share of homicides in the black community than in other communities: 4 percent of black homicide victims are killed by the police, compared with 12 percent of white and Hispanic homicide victims.²
 - ♦ In 2014, there were more than 6,000 black homicide victims;³ in 2013, homicide was the *leading* cause of death among African-Americans aged 15–35.⁴
 - ♦ A *Washington Post* study found 258 black victims of police shootings in 2015; in 188 of those cases, the victim was armed with a deadly weapon at the time of the shooting.⁵
 - ♦ During 1990–2008, for 93 percent of black homicide victims, the perpetrator was also black.⁶
- While police shootings disproportionately affect black communities, such tragedies must be understood within the context of the much higher violent crime rates in those neighborhoods.
 - ♦ In 2009, in the 75 largest U.S. counties, blacks were charged with 62 percent of robberies, 57 percent of murders, and 45 percent of assaults⁷—despite constituting 15 percent of the population in those counties.⁸
 - ♦ In 2014, in New York City, blacks committed 75 percent of shootings and 70 percent of robberies, while constituting 23 percent of the population.⁹
 - ♦ During 2005–14, blacks were also responsible for 40 percent of murders of police officers.¹⁰
 - ♦ By comparison, blacks were 26 percent of all victims of police shootings in 2015,¹¹ higher than their 13 percent share of the population,¹² but lower than their share of violent criminals.

On the Record

“The Black Lives Matter movement has dangerously distorted the reality of policing, crime, and race. It is other black civilians, not the police, who overwhelmingly perpetrate violence in poor, minority communities. Sadly, the fierce hostility currently directed at law enforcement in the streets has led officers to back off of proactive policing in the neighborhoods that need it most. The result has been an even greater loss of black lives to gun violence.”

Heather Mac Donald, Senior Fellow, Manhattan Institute

Since summer 2014, a protest movement known as Black Lives Matter has rocked the nation. Triggered by a series of highly publicized police killings of black civilians, the movement holds that the police routinely gun down black men with impunity. Black Lives Matter protests inevitably label cops “murderers” and “racists.” The media and the political elites, including President Barack Obama, have embraced the proposition that policing today is rife with bias, a bias that allegedly all too often produces deadly results. This charge has escalated tension against the police in inner-city areas and has dangerously undercut police legitimacy.

The actual data on police shootings tell a different story from the one being promulgated by Black Lives Matter. Police shootings will never be randomly distributed throughout the population; they will occur where the police interact with violent criminals, armed suspects, and those resisting arrest. Unfortunately, blacks represent a dramatically disproportionate share of those populations. In fact, police use deadly force against blacks at a lower rate than would be predicted by black crime and black use of force against the police.

Do Police Unfairly Target Blacks?

In America’s 75 largest counties in 2009, blacks constituted 62 percent of all robbery defendants, 57 percent of all murder defendants, 45 percent of all assault defendants¹³—but only 15 percent

of the population.¹⁴ Such disparities are mirrored at the city level. In New York City in 2014, blacks committed 75 percent of shootings and 70 percent of robberies—as reported by the victims of and witnesses to those crimes—but represented only 23 percent of the population. (Whites committed less than 2 percent of shootings and 4 percent of robberies in New York City in 2014, though they are 34 percent of the city’s population.)¹⁵

Further, it is black communities that suffer the epidemic of violent crime committed by black perpetrators. Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African-Americans,¹⁶ and the 6,095 black homicide victims in 2014 represented the majority of all homicide victims nationwide.¹⁷ In more than 90 percent of cases, the perpetrator is another black civilian,¹⁸ whereas in only 4 percent of cases is the perpetrator a police officer. By comparison, police are the perpetrators in 12 percent of homicides involving a white or Hispanic victim.¹⁹

Disproportionately high black crime rates mean that police—if they are deploying their resources where they are most needed—will be called disproportionately to minority neighborhoods in response to violent incidents. When confronting armed suspects, police will be disproportionately confronting blacks. From 2005 to 2014, blacks were 40 percent of known cop killers,²⁰ but only about 13 percent of the nation’s population.²¹

Fewer than a third of police killings of civilians have black victims. From 2003 to 2009, blacks made up 32 percent of all arrest-related homicides, according to the Justice Department²²—far less than what black violent-crime rates would predict. According to the *Washington Post*, in 2015, blacks made up 26 percent of police homicide victims.²³ (Though media coverage of police killings focuses almost exclusively on black victims, whites made up 42 percent of all police homicide victims during 2003–09;²⁴ in the *Washington Post*’s 2015 analysis, whites were 50 percent of police homicide victims.)²⁵

Total levels of police use of force are also much lower than the violence that officers confront. In New York City in 2013, for example, criminals committed 1,103 shootings, wounding or killing 1,299 victims. The New York Police Department’s 35,000 officers, by contrast, discharged their guns a mere 40 times, despite having been dispatched 80,000 times to investigate weapons reports and having encountered guns and other weapons in more than 25,000 arrests. New York police injured 17 people and killed eight. Almost all of those victims had extensive and serious criminal records; most had threatened the officer with deadly force.²⁶

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A Counterproductive Distraction

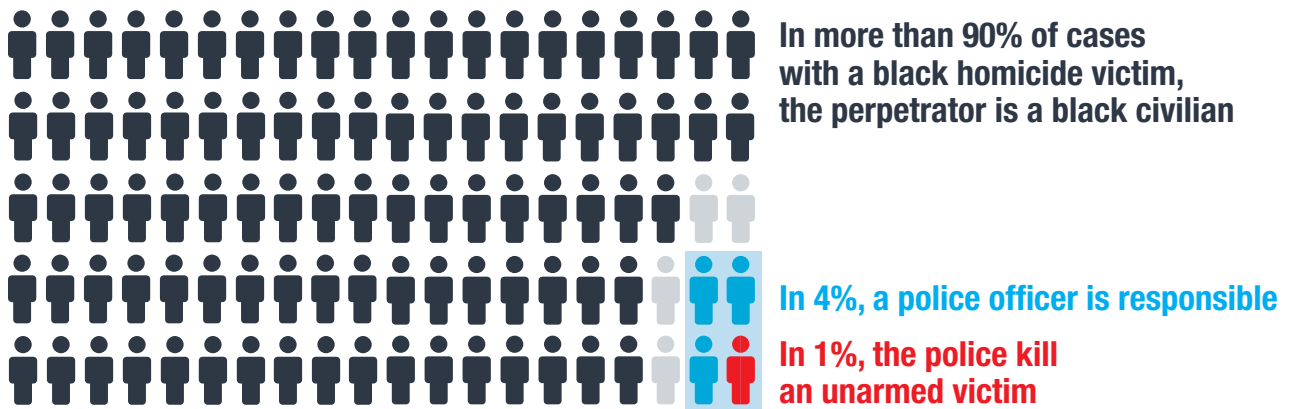
Active policing is critical to reducing violent crime in black communities. But it is not only violent crime that predicts police presence and tactics. Community requests for assistance are the other major driver of police strategy. Police-community meetings in minority neighborhoods inevitably feature calls for more policing, not less. Law-abiding residents want the drug dealers off their corners; they want the pot-smokers out of their lobbies; and they want the crowds of teens fighting on the streets arrested for truancy or loitering. Minority neighborhoods generate the lion's share of complaints regarding low-level quality-of-life offenses, such as public drinking and disorderly conduct. The police *cannot* respond to these heartfelt pleas for public order without engaging disproportionately with lawbreakers in minority communities. In the overwhelming number of such interactions, the police use no force whatsoever.

But the media's incessant charge that the police are racist increases the chance that a black suspect, convinced that he is being singled out because of his race, will resist police authority. For instance, in Chicago, from September 2014 to September 2015, blacks made up 77 percent of all arrests for obstruction of justice and resisting arrest.²⁷ Such resistance raises the likelihood that an officer will use force, since the greatest determinant of police behavior is civilian behavior. According to the Justice Department, "use of force typically occurs when police are trying to make an arrest and the suspect is resisting."²⁸

Existing data also rebut the claim that white officers are more likely than minority officers to use force against black suspects. A Justice Department review of the Philadelphia Police Department, released in March 2015, found that black and Hispanic officers were far more likely than white officers to shoot black civilians based on a mistaken perception that the civilian was armed.²⁹ A 2015 University of Pennsylvania study of New York City police officers involved in shootings between 2004 and 2006 found that black officers were 3.3 times more likely to shoot than other officers.³⁰

The police have an obligation to treat everyone they encounter with courtesy and respect and to use force only when necessary. Every unjustified officer shooting of an unarmed civilian is a horrific tragedy, which police training must work tirelessly to avoid. But law enforcement could end all use of lethal force tomorrow, and it would have, at most, a negligible effect on the black death-by-homicide rate, which is driven overwhelmingly by murders committed by other black civilians.³¹ The Black Lives Matter movement has been a counterproductive distraction from the real violence problem facing black communities: violence from criminals, not the police.

Homicide is the leading cause of death for young African-Americans



Source: Department of Justice, Center for Disease Control, *Washington Post*

Endnotes

- ¹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/01/17/the-4th-democratic-debate-transcript-annotated-who-said-what-and-what-it-meant>.
- ² See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016) (police homicides); https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_ethnicity_and_sex_2014.xls (total homicides).
- ³ See https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_ethnicity_and_sex_2014.xls.
- ⁴ See http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/LCWK1_2013.pdf.
- ⁵ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016).
- ⁶ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>.
- ⁷ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc09.pdf>, table 5.
- ⁸ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc02.pdf>.
- ⁹ See http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/analysis_and_planning/enforcement_report_year_end_2014.pdf.
- ¹⁰ See https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/leoka/2014/tables/table_47_leos_fk_race_and_sex_of_known_offender_2005-2014.xls.
- ¹¹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016) (police homicides); https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_ethnicity_and_sex_2014.xls (total homicides).
- ¹² See <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.
- ¹³ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc09.pdf>, table 5.
- ¹⁴ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fdluc02.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ See http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/analysis_and_planning/enforcement_report_year_end_2014.pdf.
- ¹⁶ See http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/dvs/LCWK1_2013.pdf.
- ¹⁷ See https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_ethnicity_and_sex_2014.xls.
- ¹⁸ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016) (police homicides); https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2014/crime-in-the-u.s.-2014/tables/expanded-homicide-data/expanded_homicide_data_table_1_murder_victims_by_race_ethnicity_and_sex_2014.xls (total homicides).
- ²⁰ See https://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/leoka/2014/tables/table_47_leos_fk_race_and_sex_of_known_offender_2005-2014.xls.
- ²¹ See <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/00000.html>.
- ²² See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ard0309st.pdf>, table 5; and <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/upshot/police-killings-of-blacks-what-the-data-says.html>.
- ²³ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016).
- ²⁴ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ard0309st.pdf>.
- ²⁵ See <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/> (accessed January 18, 2016).
- ²⁶ See http://www.nyc.gov/html/nypd/downloads/pdf/analysis_and_planning/nypd_annual_firearms_discharge_report_2013.pdf.
- ²⁷ Response by Chicago Police Department to author's Freedom of Information Act request.
- ²⁸ See <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/176330-1.pdf>.
- ²⁹ See <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/departments-justice-releases-report-philadelphia-police-departments-use-deadly-force>.
- ³⁰ See <http://amstat.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/2330443X.2015.1129918>.
- ³¹ See <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/htus8008.pdf>.