

UC Merced

UC Merced Undergraduate Research Journal

Title

Police Brutality Against Black Women

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5g9053q0>

Journal

UC Merced Undergraduate Research Journal, 10(2)

Author

Lawson, Madison

Publication Date

2018

DOI

10.5070/M4102038930

Copyright Information

Copyright 2018 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Undergraduate



It is certain, in any case, that ignorance, allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have.
- James Baldwin



Police Brutality Against Black Women

Madison Lawson

University of California, Merced

Keywords: Police Brutality, Racial Profiling, Intersectionality



Abstract

In this argumentative research essay, the idea of an intersectional lens is used to examine the class and race of women who are victims of police brutality. With stories of African-American women in low economic cities, it is clear that minority women are more likely to fall victim due to their neighborhood they live in and because of their stereotype of being weak. African-American women are being sexually assaulted and murdered by police and then never receive justice because the media, who can share the story often; however, their stories are never told. In this essay, stories of different types of police assault are told to elucidate the harsh reality that black women face in their own neighborhoods.



In 2015, African-Americans made up 23% of the police violence victims in the United States even though they are only 13% of the population. With this data, it proves that, “black Americans 2.5 times as likely as white Americans to be shot and killed by police officers,” (Burghart 2015). Stereotypes and racial profiling of African-Americans is one of the most evident contributions to police brutality and correlates to why blacks are often shot more in comparison to the white race. To further this argument, Philando Castile, a 32-year-old black male, was pulled over by the police because he had looked like a suspect in a recent robbery due to his “wide set nose”, a very common trait among African descent. Immediately following the shooting, Castile’s girlfriend began recording on Facebook live, explaining the accident, “he’s licensed to carry... he let the officer know he had a firearm and was reaching for his wallet and the officer just shot him in the arm,” (Reynolds 2016). In the state of Minnesota, it is legal to openly carry a pistol as long as you are licensed and carry the license when carrying the pistol. Castile legally had the right to be carrying a handgun and was only reaching for his license to show that he was legally carrying. Having a similar nose structure and skin color to a suspect in a robbery, the police wrongfully racially profiled Philando Castile as the suspect and instead of waiting, the officer jumped to the final level of force that police officers are able to use, deadly force. Although many black women like Lavish Reynolds, Castile’s girlfriend, appear to be only related to the victims shot, there are often cases not portrayed by the media of black women who *are* the victims of police brutality.



With the crossover of racism and sexism, women of color(WOC) are victims of many forms of abuse by those who are considered superior in our society. The term to describe this crossover that causes vulnerability in specifically WOC is intersectionality. Intersectionality is also used to bring awareness to this topic that the media rarely portrays, black female victims of police brutality. This form of vulnerability has become a profile for many black women in situations with police, which often ends with them being murdered or sexually assaulted. To further the argument of women of color being more like to fall victim to sexual assault, in the documentary *13th*, Khalil Muhammed examines history to provide context in that, “the history of interracial rape in this country, that recorded is far more marked by white race against black women than of black men against white women,” (33:30-33:43). Although most cases of police brutality against black women are sexual assault cases, lately police have killed many African-American women with bodily force or even deadly force. In many cases, women never receive justice for the crime committed against them which leads to other women to not share their stories and view at just something that happens. For the victims that must live with their story, police sexual assault has haunted many victims into being afraid to speak out against the power because the police are seen as superior.

Many people believe that more white people are killed due to police brutality than black people because there are more white people living in the United States. They believe that not only black people are shot by the police, but that more white people have been shot by the police. For example, Justine Damond, a woman who was shot after seeking help from police officers



after hearing what she suspected to be a woman being sexually attacked in an alley. Damond is not the only caucasian person to fall victim to police brutality. According to Fatal Encounters, a database created by former Reno News & Review editor Burghart, in 2015 “a total of 1,388 people were killed by police in 2015, 318 (23%) of them black, and 560 (40%) of them white,”(Burghart 2015). This data shows how more white people have been victims of police brutality than any other race through making up 40% of the deaths in the year 2015. People believe that since there have been many white victims of police violence, it is clear that they are the race that is mainly targeted due to racial hate illustrated by the unarmed white woman, Justine Damond.

Although Justine Damond was the most portrayed white woman to be shot by the police, many are unaware of the black women that are often killed by the police who were also just seeking help from the police. Tanisha Anderson, a 37-year-old mentally ill black woman, fell victim to police brutality outside of her home in Cleveland. In November 2014, Anderson was said to be having one of her “bad days” to the point where one of her family members had called 9-1-1, asking for an ambulance in order to take her to the hospital. After calling the second time, two police officers had shown up and were trying to put her in the back of their car to take her to the hospital themselves. Anderson put up a fight which led to the police, “[performing] a “takedown” move on her, slamming her against the concrete sidewalk,” (Crenshaw 2015). This move often used by police officers to detain someone where the police will force someone onto the ground and place most their body weight on the person. In Anderson’s case, the police had



put his knee on her back while handcuffing her which led to her being asphyxiated due to lack of room for lungs to move while breathing in and out. Tanisha Anderson was presumed dead upon arrival to the hospital, and her death was later ruled as a homicide in the coroner's report. A family, who was only seeking help to send Tanisha Anderson to the hospital, had witnessed the wrong use of bodily force which had led to her death.

Many black women are killed by the bodily force of the police, but more often than not, African-American women are often killed by the greatest level of force also known as deadly force. Many cases of police shootings against the black male have been largely projected across all media platforms, but rarely are the shootings of black women portrayed in the media, allowing their deaths to be belittled. One case of excessive deadly force from the police was the death of Malissa Williams, a 30-year-old woman who was a passenger in Timothy Russell's car, was brutally murdered by the police in 2012. These two black Americans were driving away from the police and when the car had backfired, sounding similar to the sound of a gunshot. The police believed that they were armed and began to follow the car into an intense police chase where eventually, "Williams and Russell were killed when Officer Michael Brelo climbed onto the hood of the car and fired several rounds at them," (Crenshaw 2015). After approaching the car without being fired at from either Williams or Russell, the officer continued to shoot multiple rounds into the car killing Malissa Williams and Timothy Russell. It is clear that as soon as Russell had stopped the car, the level of threat was not excessive because neither of them was firing a gun, or even had a gun to fire. Police such as Officer Michael Brelo have taken the level



of force needed to take down black Americans, especially black women, to the point where they are killing at a rapid pace.

Another black female victim of police brutality was Rekia Boyd, a woman who was killed by an off duty police officer in Chicago, Illinois. In March 2012, off-duty detective Dante Servin who got in a shouting match with a group of people in a dark alley and began shooting when “Antonio Cross pulled an object from his waistband and pointed it at Servin,” (2015).

Boyd was one of the members of this group and was shot in the back of the head and was later declared brain-dead due to the bullet protruding her brain. Detective Servin was not convicted of the murder of Rekia Boyd because he was tried for involuntary manslaughter but it was clear that it was first-degree murder and had no recklessness. His lack of being convicted led to Rekia’s name has been used as a cry for #blacklivesmatter in Chicago. #SayHerName has become the new way to bring attention to the women of color who are killed by the police and receive no justice whether it be because the police officers were only suspended until the city’s rage dies down or not convicted in the trial.

Although women have experienced moments that have lead to their death, many women such as Charneshia Corley have encountered experiences that will haunt them for life. In June 2015, Corley was pulled over because she was said to have rolled through a stop sign and failed using turn signals. When she was pulled over, the two Harris County deputies cuffed her and began a body search because she was suspect to be carrying marijuana. According to the federal lawsuit against Harris County, “When one of the Deputies tried to insert her fingers into Ms.



Corley's vagina, Ms. Corley protested. [They] forcibly threw Ms. Corley to the ground...pinned her down with her legs spread apart... and without consent penetrated her vagina in a purported search for marijuana," (Cammack 2017). The search from the police officer's last for a total of 11 minutes where the only possible incriminating piece of evidence was 0.2 ounces of marijuana, an offense that wouldn't even uphold criminal charges. When white male police see African-American women, there appears to be this racial profile that they are drug mules or conceal drugs within cavities of their bodies. After the racially profiling and sexual harassment of Charneshia Corley, these two police officers were acquitted of all their charges and were able to continue working.

Many people do not view sexual harassment as a form of police brutality which leads to women not speaking out. Charneshia Corley is not the only reported case of police sexual harassment as Andrea J. Ritchie illuminated in her book "Invisible No More: Police Violence Against Black Women and Women of Color". In 2014, the story of an Oklahoma City police officer raping and sexually harassing thirteen black women and girls had become widely popular. Daniel Holtzclaw became known after the sexual abuse of Jannie Ligons, a 57-year-old grandmother who was pulled over late one night on her way home. When Ritchie was describing the incident, she writes how, "He forced to lift her shirt and exposed her breasts, later her genitals, then perform oral sex on him," (Ritchie 2017). Holtzclaw's defense in court was that the women were lying because the women who had "an agenda" (Holtzclaw 2015) based on previous criminal histories. With this testimony from Daniel Holtzclaw, it was made apparent



that police use racial profiling in order to get certain things done, even if it involves sexual abuse. Not only was Daniel Holtzclaw the only police officer that has targeted women of color, but also an Officer Magaña in Oregon had specifically targeted women that had appeared to have been affected by the “war on drugs”. With multiple cases of police officers targeting women of color, it is made evident that they are more likely to be the victim of sexual assault from police officers than the white race, mainly because of racial profiling and stereotypes which mark them as vulnerable.

African American women are often overlooked in cases dealing with police brutality, which gives off the idea that their story is not as important because they are lower in economic status and have stereotypes put against them. The death of Tanisha Anderson, a mentally ill black woman whose family was only trying to seek help, illuminates the brutal bodily force that many black women endure. Not only has bodily force been used in excess against black women, but the deadly force has led to more casualties of unarmed black women illustrated by the death of Malissa Williams. Shown through Andrea Ritchie’s “Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color”, many women feel as though police sexual assault is just something that happens, leading the women to never speak out. This book also portrayed how there are multiple cases of police officers who solely attack certain women because of the stereotype of women who were affected by the “war on drugs”. The one thing that puts all these women in common is the neighborhood in which they were assaulted in. All of these neighborhoods were low economic standing and also had high crime rates which is mostly due to



the financial hardships that many of these families face. Racial profiling and stereotypes lead to black women becoming victims of police abuse but rarely find justice as equal to the white women who fall victim to police brutality and are almost never portrayed in the media. A movement started by three black queer women, Black Lives Matter, has begun to emphasize that not only are black men killed, but black women are victims of police brutality as in death and sexual abuse. The police treatment towards the black race today's society is unacceptable. Americans need to protest and advocate against police brutality so that the politicians can face their bias against skin color.



References

- “FACT CHECK: Do Police Kill More White People Than Black People?” Snopes.com, 26 Sept. 2017, www.snopes.com/do-police-kill-more-whites-than-black-people/.
- “The Lives of Black Women.” *Fault Lines*, Al Jazeera English, 18 Oct. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKh2Xp0m_QE.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. “Violence Instead of Treatment.” *Say Her Name: Resisting Police Brutality against Black Women*, African American Policy Forum, Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies, Columbia Law School, 2015, pp. 18–19.
- DuVernay, Ava, director. *13th*. Netflix, 2016.
- Kentish, Ben. “Dashcam Footage Shows Black Woman Being 'Raped' by Texas Police Officers, Claims Lawyer.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 17 Aug. 2017, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/black-woman-raped-texas-police-officers-dashcam-footage-lawyer-charneshia-corley-sam-cammack-harris-a7898491.html.
- Lieszkovszky, Ida. “Everything You Need to Know before the Start of the Trial for Cleveland Police Officer Michael Brelo.” *Cleveland.com*, 6 Apr. 2015, www.cleveland.com/court-justice/index.ssf/2015/04/everything_you_need_to_know_be.html.
- Mire, Muna. “A Brief History of What Happens When White Women Are Killed by Cops.” *Splinter*, Splinternews.com, 26 July 2017,



Undergraduate Research Journal
University of California, Merced

<https://splinternews.com/a-brief-history-of-what-happens-when-white-women-are-ki-179726363>

6

Ritchie, Andrea J. "Chapter 5: Police Sexual Violence." *Invisible No More: Police Violence against Black Women and Women of Color*, Beacon Press, 2017, pp. 104–126.



My name is Madison Lawson and I am a first year at UC Merced where I hope to graduate with a major in Biological Sciences, Human Emphasis so I can become a pediatrician. It is my dream to become a pediatrician because I have a lot of experience with working with children and I want to provide medical help to children in low-income communities whose families may not be able to afford professional medical aid. One of my greatest passions is to support a culture that values the acceptance of everyone, which was built greatly through living in Sacramento that had a very accepting community of all races and genders. I have only lived in California all my life and with California being such a diverse state, I have been able to grow my passion based on the values that I am surrounded in. I went to a small charter school called NP3 High, which I feel as though had really prepared me for college-level classes through the rigorous coursework and provided ways to study effectively. My best supporters are my mom, best friends, and my high school advisor Ms. Kidd who have all contributed to where I have gotten today whether it be with school work or emotional support. This support has helped me succeed in life and to be content with where I am mentally and physically. I own two golden retriever dogs who provide an extra source of happiness in my life, a boy who is three-years-old and a girl who is only ten-weeks-old.