

8-14-2014

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Recommended Citation

Lauren Carasik, The Second Tragedy of the Michael Brown Shooting, ALJAZEERA AMERICA (Aug. 14, 2014), <http://america.aljazeera.com/opinions/2014/8/michael-brown-shootingmediacoverageofracialtensions.html>

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The second tragedy of the Michael Brown shooting

Media portrayals of mass protest obscure serious human rights issue of police violence against African-Americans

August 14, 2014 12:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

The shooting death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, on Aug. 9 prompted an outpouring of community anger that has inflamed long-simmering racial tensions in that town. Residents of Ferguson gathered for a vigil near Brown's body as it lay sprawled in the street where he was killed, left uncovered for hours. The peaceful protests grew, eliciting a strong police response; some stores were targeted by vandals the next day, and more than 30 people have been arrested. Further protests on the night of Aug. 13 [turned violent](#), as police used tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse crowds.

Most of the protesters peacefully expressed rage and anguish about Brown's tragic death. Although police and eyewitness accounts differ, certain facts are undisputed: Brown, unarmed, was shot multiple times and killed 35 feet from a police car. Shell casings found at the scene were all fired from the officer's gun. Yet the media focused on the destructive reaction of a small segment of the community (and some reports suggest the mayhem was largely perpetrated by opportunistic outsiders), eclipsing yet another senseless death of an unarmed African-American teenager at the hands of authorities.

Media bias

Many press reports characterized the ensuing protests as a mob reaction instead of a justifiable outpouring of community anger and grief. An officer was overheard referring to the protesters as "[f---ing animals](#)." Commentators were [critical of the heavy-handed police response](#), which inflamed instead of defused the tension.

That included the deployment of police dogs, given the memories they evoke of intimidation during the civil rights protests of the 1960s, and the use of riot gear, tear gas and rubber or [wooden bullets](#). These complaints echo the concerns outlined in a report by the American Civil Liberties Union on the excessive [militarization of policing](#), bolstered by the [repurposing of military gear](#) no longer needed for war to police forces.

Imagery helps frame the narrative arc of a story, particularly one laden with racial recriminations, and critics have long denounced the negative media portrayal of African-Americans. In the aftermath of Brown's death, they decried the use of a photo in which he flashes what has been alternately characterized as a peace sign and a gang sign, instead of his high school graduation picture, reinforcing damaging stereotypes. In protest, activists launched a [Twitter campaign](#), using the hashtag [#iftheygunnedmedown](#). Thousands of African-Americans posted contrasting pictures of themselves, one respectable and one less flattering, musing about which photo the press would use to portray them if they were killed and how that choice would affect the public perception of and reaction to their deaths. Other critics lamented the emphasis that Brown was [college bound](#), as implicitly suggesting that the killing of black teenagers whose trajectory is less admirable is somehow less tragic.

The outpouring of community outrage must be understood in political and historical context. St. Louis is one of the [most segregated cities](#) in the country, with a [racially charged past](#). Ferguson, which lies on its outskirts, is a majority African-American township, with whites occupying positions of power. It has an almost exclusively white police force (only three of its 53 officers are African-American), including the chief; a white mayor; and a predominately white City Council and school board, with only one African-American member on each. A 2013 report from the Missouri attorney general documenting vehicle stops by the Ferguson police indicate [racial profiling](#): 86 percent of the drivers stopped were black, 92 percent of those arrested were black, and just under 7 percent were white, though the contraband hit rate was higher for whites (34 percent) than blacks (almost 22 percent). In November, the Missouri NAACP [filed a complaint](#)

with the [U.S. Department of Justice](#), alleging racial profiling at retail stores and discriminatory practices by the St. Louis County Police Department (which does not have jurisdiction over Ferguson). Socioeconomic conditions are even worse. Nearly [28 percent](#) of Ferguson's black population lives below the national poverty line.

The media is doing an incalculable damage in framing the response to Brown's shooting as the monolithic action of vandals or decontextualizing the rage at another young African-American life lost at the hands of the police.

A human rights issue

Perceptions of racial bias in the criminal justice system are borne out by larger studies. Last year the [Sentencing Project](#), an advocacy organization working on sentencing reform, submitted a report to the United Nations Human Rights Committee, arguing that racial minorities face bias in every step of the criminal justice process, from arrest to punishment. And these statistics cannot be wholly dismissed by higher rates of criminal behavior. They appear to be partly attributable to the implicit racial bias that colors perception and decision-making throughout the system. [In an interview with The Washington Post](#), political scientists Jon Hurwitz and Mark Peffley said studies have shown that “merely thinking about blacks can lead people to evaluate ambiguous behavior as aggressive, to miscategorize harmless objects as weapons or to shoot quickly and at times inappropriately and to endorse harsh treatment of a black (versus a white) suspect.” It is no wonder that a [Pew research study](#) found that blacks see the criminal justice system as unfair.

A study by the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement last year that is widely cited by activists noted that [security officers shoot an African-American every 28 hours](#) and that 88 percent of those killings involved excessive force. The officers allege fear and self-defense to explain their lethal response, yet implicit and overt

biases shape the contours of these perceptions. This in turn affects African-Americans' experience of biased policing.

The body count of young African-American men killed at the hands of the police continues to mount, including an [unarmed 24-year-old man killed in Los Angeles](#) on Aug. 12. Police accountability is elusive: [A recent report highlighted](#) the rarity of prosecutions in Texas against officers who use deadly force. The deaths fuel the public perception of police impunity, which is heightened when local departments do not reflect the diversity of the populations they serve.

The looting in Ferguson will not heal the community or bring comfort to Brown's grieving family. But the media do incalculable damage in framing the town's response as the monolithic action of vandals or decontextualizing the rage at another young African-American life lost at the hands of the police.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.