

## **Black people are portrayed as criminals, even when they are victims**

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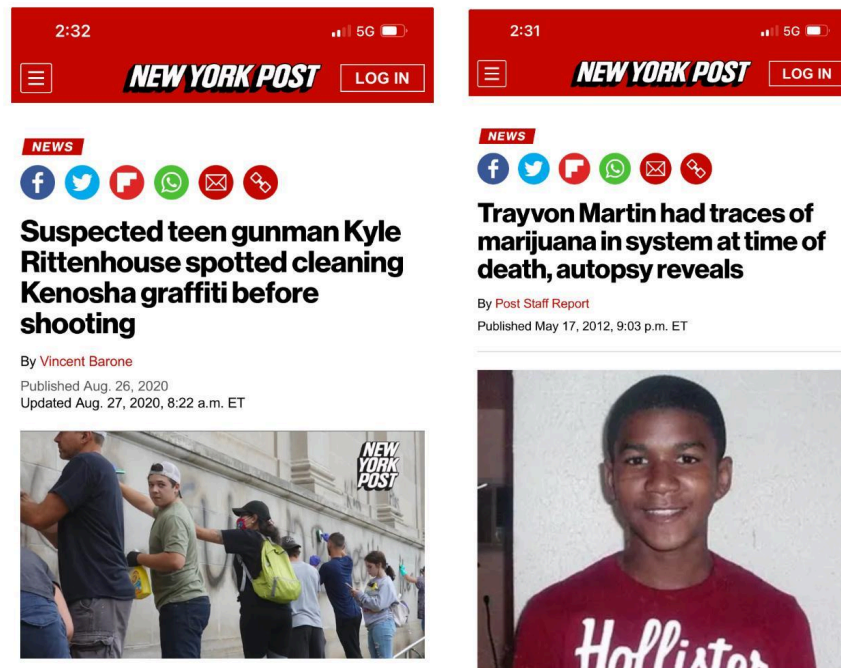
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Black Americans are facing a serious national problem when coming in contact with the criminal justice system. Portrayals of Black Americans and crime in the media make an already daunting procedure, more terrifying. The 2020 Black Lives Matter protests are proof that Black Americans feel they are treated differently. In a Pew Research Survey, 87% of Black adults said Black people are generally treated less fairly by the criminal justice system than White people. White adults are not blind to the issue either. At 61%, the majority of White adults believe the criminal justice system in America, treats Black people less fairly.

The criminal justice system has far more reach than most may consider. Law enforcement agencies and governmental institutions have long been reliable sources for journalists throughout American history. It is assumed that if there is information about a crime, the police will provide true and accurate information. But if there is racial bias in the criminal justice system, this may have an effect on how journalists report on crime.

Since 1935, nearly every reported race riot in the U.S. has been sparked by a police incident. A lot of these reported riots began as peaceful protests, authorized by the First Amendment. According to the Media Diversity Institute, it is when the police become involved, that it is deemed a riot. Is it deemed a race riot by the police and then journalists report what is told to them or... are journalists calling the protests riots for sensationalism?

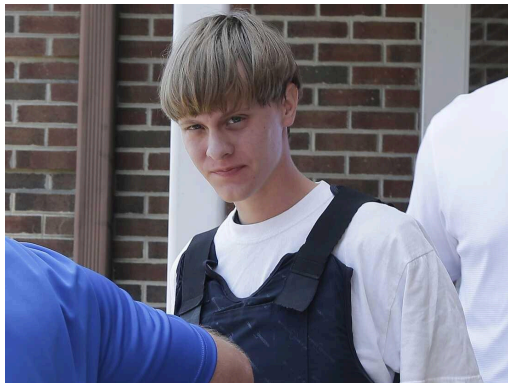
Retired civil rights activist, Rita Thompson, stated, “Black people have been beaten by the police and misheard from the media for a long time”, said Thompson. “I remembered the first time the world got to see the police officers violently attacking Rodney King. Even after all these years, I can’t say much has changed.”



Even when Black people are victims of crime or injustice they can still be painted as criminals in the media. The “angel” treatment is reserved for White people. For example, in 2012 the *New York Post* published an article covering the murder of Trayvon Martin. The headline read, “Trayvon Martin had traces of marijuana in system at time of death, autopsy reveals.” This

headline suggests that although Martin had been murdered in cold blood, he may have deserved it since he broke the law in a separate case.

In comparison, crimes committed by White people can be depicted as “mistakes” or self defense. In the same publication, the *New York Post* published an article in 2020, covering Kyle Rittenhouse’s crimes. The headline reads, “Suspected teen gunman Kyle Rittenhouse spotted cleaning Kenosha graffiti before shooting.” A White person, who broke several laws and murdered people, somehow is depicted as a good and decent person. All the while, a Black victim of crime is painted as a criminal or thug. Unfortunately, this is an age-old story here in the United States.



In 2015, news broke that there were nine lives lost in a mass shooting at a Charleston, South Carolina church. The shooter, Dylann Roof, was said to have walked into the church, joining the ten Black church members for Bible study. Before he left, nine of them were murdered. *NBC News* published an article that was headlined, “Charleston Church Shooter Dylann Roof Was Loner Caught in 'Internet Evil': Family.” The headline paints the picture of a lonely, ostracized kid who simply was tricked into making this “mistake.” The reality is that Roof was not a kid, he was 21 years old at the time of the massacre. According to the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Magazine, *Learning for Justice*, Roof had been participating in White

supremacists groups prior to the massacre. He was very clear in his manifesto that this was an act based on his hatred of Black people. This was no mistake.

Crimes committed by Black people do not receive the same treatment from the media. Victims are often depicted as deserving of the pain inflicted upon them. Even the images used in news stories reflect how Black people are seen. Images of Black people in news stories are often mugshots, even when the story isn't about that specific crime. White people have committed familicide but are pictured in a positive nature.

The manner in which media outlets depict people of all races, trickles down to consumers. How people are depicted can affect how one sees people of different races or worse, reinforce the biases that are already there.

For decades now, the Black American community has been racially profiled and systematically treated as unequal to their White American counterparts. Due to this historical mistreatment of Black Americans, many have been stereotyped as dangerous, less than, uneducated, and criminals. This history of racism has trickled down into the media. This is better known as racial biases when it comes to the coverage of crimes.

The Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) report of 2021 examined criminal cases surrounding White and Black Americans. The results showed that the use of imagery, language choices, and the framing of the accused and the victim were covered differently for White people and Black people. EJI director Bryan Stevenson said, "News media have often reinforced a presumption of guilt and dangerousness assigned to Black people when reporting on crime while devaluing the

lives of Black people and the harm they suffer when victimized. American media can and should do better in eliminating racially biased coverage.”

The report goes on to show that when it comes to mugshots being displayed in the media, 45% of Black mugshots are shown in comparison to Whites at only 8%. Trials displayed on television or photos captured of the trial in a news article show Black people are either in orange jumpsuits or “street clothes.” White people shown on trial are usually presented wearing a suit.

Language and the labels used in the media are also a factor to creating a racial bias angle in covering crime. For white criminals, labels used include: man, father, son, self-defense, aggravated, convicted, charges, and violation. Usually, these men are well into their adult life and the ages also are a tactic to help frame the story.

When it comes to black criminals, labels used include: murder, accused, arrested, shooting, robbery, killing and guilty. Typically, these black criminals are young teenage boys or men in their early 20s. For years the media have strategically angled Black criminals in a more negative light making the story and the person seem dangerous and scary.

In order to provide a more neutral frame for both White and Black people, the media must cease using images that let on the perception of guilt. As humans, it’s normal for many of us to sometimes be prejudiced without knowing the full extent of the story. To avoid this problem in the future, media coverage



should avoid using images that perpetuate harmful stereotypes further. The media should adopt a more neutral language for coverage of crime. In the photo above, the three White men and the three Black men committed the same crime of burglary on different occasions. However, when it broke the news, the White men's yearbook photos were broadcasted and the Black men's mugshots were broadcasted.

Public narratives often fail to highlight the disproportionate level of victimization in Black neighborhoods. Highlighting violence and criminal acts in Black neighborhoods and communities is a product of structural racism. According to the article *Invest in Black Lives to Protect Black Lives*, the author discusses how Black Americans are more likely than White Americans to experience poverty and unemployment. Although Black people make up 13% of the American population, they account for 40% of the homeless population.

These are some of the factors that contribute to the Black community having a higher crime rate than other communities. It is not because of their skin color, instead it's because of the failure of our government in supporting all communities. Investments in Black communities across the nation is the solution to this high crime rate stigma. Investments include: mental health treatment, education, employment, stable housing, and the overall protection of Black lives.

People with mental health issues are more likely to become targeted and victims of crime. Many Black people who suffer with mental health issues turn to substance abuse and are unable to keep healthy and stable relationships. They also experience and become involved in crime in their lifetime. If Black communities experienced adequate mental health resources, it could change the perception of Black people and crime. Unfortunately, many mental health care clinics

require their patients to have health insurance. However, Black Americans are less likely to have insurance compared to White people due to unemployment.

Another solution is education. Knowledge and exposure can help to reduce some of the issues that the Black community faces. Improving educational opportunities and access to knowledge can break the cycle of poverty and reduce crime rates. Stable housing is another good asset that the Black community has historically struggled to obtain. Research shows that when states invest in supportive housing for people at risk for crime, they are less likely to engage in crime.

The poverty rates that Black Americans face and the lack of investment in stable housing all lead to systemic inequalities. High levels of poverty are often associated with higher crime rates. Discrimination in housing, education, and employment opportunities can limit social mobility and contribute to criminal behavior.

One of the most important ways to find a solution to this issue is for everyone to understand that Black lives matter. They need to be protected just like other lives are. It's been an ongoing battle for centuries for Black people to be looked at as not only capable people, but as equal. By collectively addressing these underlying issues and working towards creating more equitable opportunities, society can contribute to fostering safer and more resilient communities for everyone.

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