

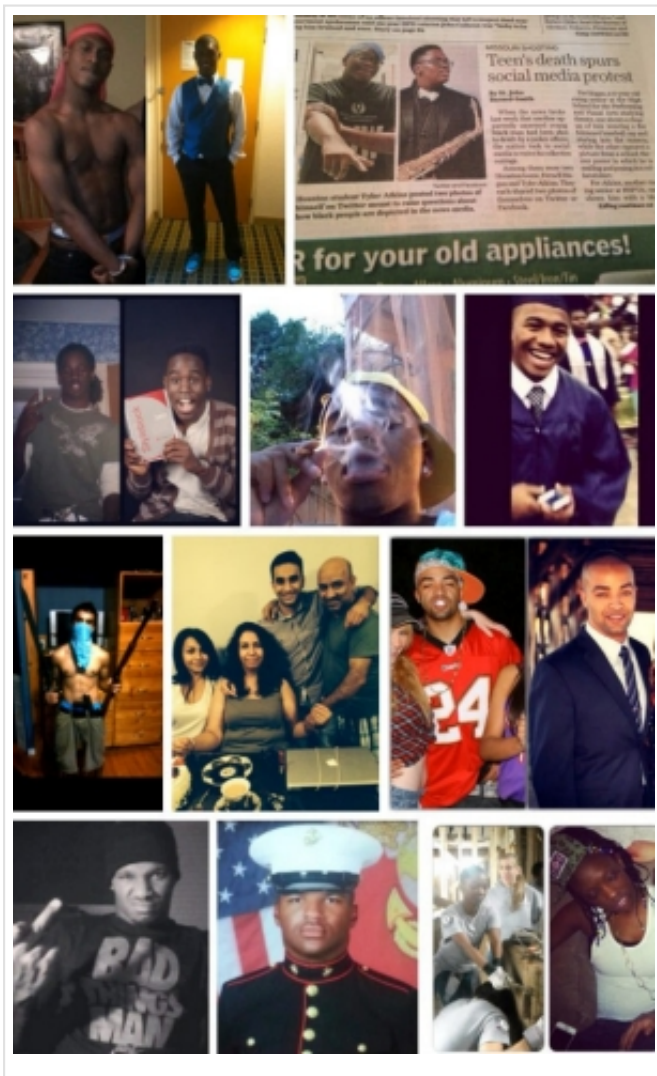
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Ferguson reports raise questions on media 'criminalization' of blacks

by Renee Lewis • 4 min read • [original](#)

Recent debate over the types of photos used to portray black shooting victims exposes a widely held bias that assumes they are “criminals,” rights advocates said this week as many in the African-American community called attention to what they say is mainstream media misrepresentation in the wake of yet another [police shooting](#) of an unarmed black man.

A Twitter campaign has drawn nearly 200,000 users to repost the hashtag “iftheygunnedmedown,” which poses the question: “If they gunned me down, what photo would you use?”



Screenshot of Twitter users' posts under the hashtag #iftheygunnedmedown.

Al Jazeera

Police shot and killed unarmed Missouri teenager Michael Brown, 18, on Saturday in the Ferguson suburb of St. Louis, **sparking protests** in the mostly black community against the mostly white police force.

Though some initial media reports showed Brown smiling at his high school graduation in cap and gown, most chose a photo of a stoic-looking Brown wearing a red jersey and throwing what some could interpret as a “gang sign,” which friends said was simply a peace sign.

Some experts said such media portrayals reveal a pattern of criminalizing black bodies in the U.S. media.

“It’s playing into the bias exposed after [Trayvon Martin was killed](#). Even though young white people wear hoodies too, (George) Zimmerman saw someone who was ... ‘up to no good,’” said Rashad Robinson, executive director of Color of Change, a group aimed at strengthening black Americans’ political voice.

“These young people have their bodies criminalized even after death.”

Criminalization occurs when images chosen by media consciously or unconsciously create a justification for why people of color are killed, Robinson said.

After African-American teen [Renisha McBride was shot](#) and killed by a resident in a mostly white neighborhood while reportedly asking for help after a car accident, the media focused on whether or not McBride was drunk or high on marijuana at the time — a debate that Robinson said glosses over the fact that she likely posed no threat to her shooter.

Many African-Americans feel like they have to prove they are “one of the good ones” in order to gain sympathy in mainstream America, he said, noting that Brown’s mother told reporters after his death that her son had graduated and was headed for college.

“They have to earn the right for the benefit of the doubt, or to be humanized, or to gain empathy for their family,” Robinson said. “This is how the media views the humanity of black people, their dignity in life and in death.”



[Click here for more coverage of unrest in Ferguson](#)

Others agreed, and said the United States has a long history of negative media representations of African-Americans.

“This is nothing new, that’s what’s so sad,” said Robin Kelly, professor of history at UCLA. “The portrayal of black men hasn’t really changed except that there’s a lot more indifference now.”

Kelly said that in February of 2000, thousands of protesters marched in New York City after police were acquitted in the [killing of Amadou Diallo](#)— an African immigrant shot by police with 19 of 41 bullets fired at him as he stood in the entrance of his apartment building.

Diallo had reportedly taken out his wallet, which police thought was a gun. After his death, protesters held their wallets in the air and chanted, ‘It’s a wallet, not a gun!’ Images of protesters in Brown’s community of Ferguson, Missouri, with their hands raised, shouting “Hands up, don’t shoot,” are hauntingly similar.

“Well, it’s the same as it ever was — with black men shown as minstrels or clowns or dangerous criminals,” said Gregory Lewis, political activist and host of the weekly [Seattle podcast](#) “All Power to the Positive.”

“The traditional narrative is that black people are no good, they’re out there selling dope and shooting each other. And Trayvon, they said he was a little thug ... but it doesn’t matter — the constitution said you can’t go shoot someone on suspicion.”

Kelly said such stereotypes have persisted decades after the civil rights movement because many Americans believe they live in a post-racial society — an attitude she said contributes to indifference.

“The fact of the matter is that whiteness presumes innocence, and blackness presumes guilt, and you have to prove yourself otherwise,” Kelly said. “This has become routine. We have studies from the Malcom X Foundation that say every 28 hours a black man dies with his hands up — that’s not a small statistic, that’s incredible.”

Exacerbating the problem, Robinson said, are media portrayals of African-American men in narrow roles.

“A recent Pew Research Poll said **most Americans** get their news from local news coverage and local news coverage of black men was relegated overwhelmingly — around 80 percent — to **crime and sports**,” Robinson said. “The media has a responsibility to delve into stereotypes and debunk them.”

He said such coverage leaves an impression in many Americans’ minds of where different groups fit into the larger culture, and affects the treatment they receive.

“It impacts how black boys are perceived as valuable or threatening in school. It determines treatment in courtrooms, treatment by police,” Robinson said. “The media has to paint a true picture of society.”

The situation spotlights an underlying fear of black men in the U.S., Robinson said. But after so many incidents of unarmed black men being killed because the shooter felt threatened, he said it is people of color who

should be afraid.

“I remember vividly a conversation I had with my father before I went off to college about the ongoing test that each of us would have to face because of who we are. Blacks in America should feel threatened by the state that we’re in,” Robinson said.

Kelly echoed that, saying he was raised to constantly demonstrate his innocence when out in public because he is African-American – things like keeping his hands out of his pockets while entering a store, or how to speak to police officers.

Last Wednesday police shot dead another unarmed black man, 22-year-old John Crawford, in an Oregon Walmart because he was holding an air rifle being sold in the toy section.

Crawford reportedly said, “It’s not real” before police yelled “get on the ground” and shots were fired.

The same day, Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense in America, a gun-control advocacy group, [shared photos of men](#) — none of whom were African-American — carrying semi-automatic rifles in the baby section of a Target store.

The men, some from gun rights group Open Carry Texas, said they were asserting their constitutional right to carry such guns in public. Some wonder if they would have survived such an action if they were black.

“Any white person can walk around with a shotgun and no one looks twice,” Kelly said. “Put a whole bunch of black men with guns walking on the streets, that won’t happen.”

Kelly said African-Americans are largely aware that many people perceive them as threatening, and have adapted to that reality.

“One of the saddest things about Brown’s murder was the extent to which these young people are so articulate about the language of police activity,” Kelly said. “They understood what was appropriate behavior, saying ‘he had his hands up.’ They didn’t learn that from watching television, its because they have to deal with the police and save their own lives everyday.”

“They know they are a potential body count,” Kelly said.

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