

Media portrayals of black men contribute to police violence, study says

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Pamela Valera. Credit: Nick Romanenko/Rutgers University

Negative portrayals in the news media affect how police treat black men in the United States, according to a Rutgers School of Public Health study.

The study appears in the book *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*.

The study was based on the premise that public perceptions of male dangerousness are a factor in influencing police action and the public's willingness to accept an officer's deadly actions as legitimate. It also noted that black masculinity is often equated with hypermasculinity, criminality and hypersexuality.

"Unarmed black Americans are five times more likely to be shot and killed by police than unarmed white Americans. We believe that [media](#) may play a significant role in these disproportionate deaths," said lead author Pamela Valera, an assistant professor. "The stereotypes held, consciously or unconsciously, about the criminality and 'dangerousness' of [black men](#) influence the rates at which they are stopped and engaged by the police."

To illustrate their premise, researchers reviewed coverage in three newspapers—The New York Times, Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post—of Michael Brown, an unarmed teenager in Ferguson, Missouri, who was shot to death in 2014 by Darren Wilson, a white police officer. The newspapers were selected due to their high potential to impact public opinion.

The researchers examined how the media framed the perceived masculinity of Brown and Wilson in covering the case. In particular, they examined how the three newspapers used Wilson's account of the event in their descriptions of Brown. The newspapers depicted Brown through Wilson's testimony as a man of large physical size with uncontrollable aggression, but neglected the fact that the two men were of comparable size. For example, one account describes how Wilson compares himself holding on to Brown's arm to "a 5-year-old trying to hold on to Hulk Hogan."

"Newspapers use sensational words to get hits. However, the words they used depicted Brown as a monster," Valera said. "Language is critical to public perception. The media should tone down emotion in its reporting."

The researchers also analyzed the words used to describe Brown and Wilson's socioeconomic class and neighborhoods. Brown's status was framed by descriptions of his neighborhood: "trappings of a working-class haven" with an "edge of frustration and anger." Conversely, Wilson was portrayed as having overcome a troubled childhood to make a life in a suburban neighborhood with "brick ranch-style homes" and "manicured lawns."

"This is just one snapshot of a larger, ongoing problem of aggression toward black men based on [racial bias](#) perpetuated by [negative stereotypes](#) in the media," said Valera. "Since the perceptions that Wilson held of Brown are indicative of more general attitudes of black men, it is vital that [police](#) be engaged in more [intensive training](#) to become aware of the stereotypes and implicit biases they hold, especially regarding the communities with which they have constant contact."

More information: Michael Oshiro et al, Framing Physicality and Public Safety: A study of Michael Brown and Darren Wilson, *Inequality, Crime, and Health Among African American Males* (2018). [DOI: 10.1108/S0195-744920180000020010](#)

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