

Vox

13 black women on how an Oklahoma City police officer terrorized their neighborhood

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When a police officer fails to uphold the law, whom do you tell? And will doing anything even matter? These questions are underscored in the testimony of 13 black women in Oklahoma City who accused former police officer Daniel Holtzclaw of several instances of sexual assault and rape. Thursday night, a jury found Holtzclaw guilty on 18 out of 36 charges of burglary, indecent exposure, stalking, sexual battery, forcible oral sodomy, and rape after 40 hours of deliberation.

BuzzFeed's Jessica Testa captured the testimony of the 13 black women (identified to the public only by their initials) who came forward after a police investigation alleged Holtzclaw assaulted them between December 2013 and June 2014. Their testimonies, given in court last year and unreported in full until Testa's December 9 article, show several disturbing patterns of stalking, coercion, and abuse of power between citizens in minority communities and police officers.

Holtzclaw preyed upon their distrust in the system

The most striking common thread in the testimony was the hopelessness of the victims, many of whom were low-income with criminal records. Because of this, most of the 13 women said they assumed they wouldn't be believed if they reported him. So they didn't.

With the exception of 17-year-old A., who was discouraged by a friend from reporting her rape to avoid looking like a "snitch," nearly all of the women who testified against the officer said they did not report their assaults because they did not think the police would believe them.

"... Who are they going to believe?" said C.J. "It's my word against his because I'm a woman and, you know, like I said, he's a police officer. So I just left it alone and just prayed that I never saw this man again, run into him again, you know."

Another woman, T.M., said, "I didn't think nobody was going to believe me anyway. And I'm a drug addict, so the only way I knew to handle it was to go and get high to try to block it out, to make it seem like it didn't happen."

And T.B. said, "I didn't think anything would be done. I mean, it was nobody there but just me and him, so to me I just took it as my word against his, so I just blew it off — as best as I could just walked away from it."

The earliest documented encounter between Holtzclaw and one of the women was December 2013. It wasn't until June 2014 when a woman identified as J., with the encouragement of her daughter, reported being sexually assaulted by Holtzclaw to police. Her allegations spurred the investigation into Holtzclaw's interactions with women.

Holtzclaw carefully chose his targets

In many cases, the women said they were assaulted after being stopped by Holtzclaw for seemingly no discernible reason. When Holtzclaw ran their names through the police system, he found many had warrants or outstanding tickets. Some had criminal backgrounds, and some were sex workers. The police stop may have seemed like business as usual for these women; many were of lower economic status, and statistically, poorer black neighborhoods tend to be more heavily policed and experience high rates of incarceration. But the women said Holtzclaw would then leverage this information, stipulating they either go to jail or perform sexual acts on him.

Some of the women testified they had some run-ins with the law previously, and were worried about their records or being sent back to jail. Other times, Holtzclaw found many of these women with drug paraphernalia, or a few accusers said they had been drinking or using drugs right before Holtzclaw approached them. Another had warrants for her arrest and was told that if she complied with him by exposing her body, he would make the warrants go away. In all cases, Holtzclaw abused his own authority as a police officer to take advantage of these women's vulnerability in the situation and the shame they carried for their prior arrests or drug use.

"I'm an alcoholic and I suffer with that problem since — for years. Since the '80s," said R.C. "And I failed so many times — and I was ashamed, you know. I didn't go to prison until I was 30 years old, but my mother was a Christian, so I was ashamed of what I was doing, you know."

Another woman, R.G., said she had relapsed and used crack cocaine the day she encountered Holtzclaw. She was walking alone, and he offered to take her to detox instead of jail. Instead, he drove her home and followed her into her house. She said she thought he was being overly thorough, but then she said he forced her into oral sodomy and then raped her. She said she felt especially intimidated by the gun in his holster.

Holtzclaw's feigned concern for safety

If Holtzclaw couldn't identify a criminal or legal problem, he would express concern for their safety and offer to drive them home. While many of the women found his concern suspicious, they said they took the ride instead of resisting or inciting any tension that could have provoked their arrest.

S.B. said she was walking home when Holtzclaw pulled up to her and asked whether she was leaving "a drug house." She said she wasn't, nor did she have any drugs or paraphernalia on her, though she did have a drink earlier that evening. Still, he said he would take her to "detox or jail," but when she said she'd rather just go home, he said he would do that. Instead, he drove her

to an isolated road known as "Dead Man's Curve" and, according to S.B., said she had two new choices: forced sex or jail.

In R.C.'s case, she recalled he offered to take her to a detox facility instead of jail. But he didn't. Instead, R.C. said he took her to a bus parking lot and raped her, and then he let her go.

J., the youngest accuser, said she was surprised when Holtzclaw walked her to the porch of her mother's home. But that's where she said he then raped her.

In most cases, Holtzclaw uses his position of power to manipulate the often vulnerable women he came across — quickly trying to build a feeling of trust under the guise of protection, only to almost instantly invalidate that trust.

Holtzclaw constantly returned

Holtzclaw used his status and authority in many ways to keep violating victims. In their testimony, the women said they kept seeing him after the initial assault, and in at least one case he entered one of their houses. By reappearing before the women he assaulted, he asserted his sustained power as a police officer and their status as women who felt they had no legal recourse to stop him.

Several women said Holtzclaw returned to their homes or was spotted lurking nearby, sometimes on multiple occasions. In one incident, he pulled up to one woman who was at a function with friends and family members. He asked whether she'd told anyone about his previous interaction with her. When she said she, in fact, told her "whole neighborhood" what happened, he sped away.

Another woman, identified as T.B., said she noticed Holtzclaw's patrol car in her driveway or around her home on multiple occasions. One day, her boyfriend said he woke up to Holtzclaw in their house, where Holtzclaw demanded the boyfriend come outside so he could run his name through the police system. T.B.'s mother insisted T.B. move her family out of the neighborhood to avoid the officer, and she did.

Sexual assault from police is not uncommon, but it's underreported

While the shocking details of Holtzclaw's case has captured some national attention, a searing [Associated Press](#) investigation found that 550 police officers lost their certification from 2009 to 2014 for sexual assault, rape, groping, and forced sexual favors to avoid arrest. Another 440 officers were decertified for other sexual offenses including child pornography voyeurism and consensual sex on the job, which is prohibited.

But as Vox's Dara Lind [pointed out](#) last month, these 990 police officers were the ones who were caught and then punished for their actions. There's no account of how many have gotten away with these acts. As Sarasota, Florida, Police Chief Bernadette DiPino told the AP, officers across the country engage with citizens in sexually violent manners. "It's so underreported," she said, "and people are scared that if they call and complain about a police officer, they think every other police officer is going to be then out to get them."

While officer-involved shootings involving black victims do get a lot of attention, sexual assault is the second most common form of police misconduct, according to the African American Policy Forum, citing a 2010 Cato Institute study. Of the 618 officers with sexual misconduct complaints that year, 354 of them were accused of sexual assault or sexual battery. For black women, advocates say the situation is particularly dire.

"Black women are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault by police due to historically entrenched presumptions of promiscuity and sexual availability," the AAPF wrote in its 2015 report "Say Her Name." "Historically, the American legal system has not protected Black women from sexual assault, thereby creating opportunities for law enforcement officials to sexually abuse them with the knowledge that they are unlikely to suffer any penalties for their actions."

Some were skeptical that an all-white jury with eight men and four women would necessarily find Holtzclaw, who is white and Japanese, guilty. Despite all this — the officer distrust, the use of sexual force, the status of the women Holtzclaw abused, and the makeup of the jury — he was brought to justice Thursday night. And because of J., the other women who finally spoke up, and the police department that listened to the accusers, Holtzclaw won't be able to abuse his power as a police officer again.