



# When we talk about police shootings, we need to talk about gender

By Melanie Poole  
December 17, 2014

As the national conversation around police violence continues in the aftermath of Ferguson, we need to be talking about men and masculinity. Because there are not many female cops shooting. Nor many women being shot.

Over [90 percent of all homicides](#) in America are committed by men. And, when it comes to police who commit homicide, it turns out that the gender imbalance is even more profound. It seems that it isn't just cops who are killing the Michael Browns and Eric Garners of America. It is male cops.

At first, this seems unsurprising, given that only 11.4 percent of all police officers in the US are female. But, on this basis, female police should be responsible for more than 1 in 10 police shootings. They're not. Decades of FBI data reveal that the officers who kill (perceived) offenders (in "justifiable homicides") are [male at least 98 percent of the time](#). These officers are white males at least 84 percent of the time – though, [since 87.5% of police officers are white](#), this is not surprising. (The fact that police are overwhelmingly white, and male, is clearly a problem in itself — but that's a different issue.)

Researchers have, correspondingly, found that [women police officers are significantly less likely to shoot than male officers](#). A trawl through [the details of police shootings and assaults](#) supports this research — the involvement of female officers is rare. Even when female officers are involved, it is very unusual for them to be the key actor.

Gender is also the most significant factor in determining *who* police shoot. Black men are disproportionately targeted, definitely. But so are men in general – [less than 2 percent of people killed by police are female](#). Why? This is not only a question of race. The question is: what about the *combination* of being black AND male invokes such fear in white male police?

And yet, when we talk about police killings, while we rightly talk about race, we ignore gender.

[Scientific experiments are performed](#) to test the way that bias influences whether police pull the trigger on an unarmed person. These experiments prove that police are more likely to kill an

unarmed black man than an unarmed white man — but the analysis stops there. Women weren't included.

[Lists like this](#) one of teenagers shot by police appear, but the gender of the police officer/s responsible is never mentioned.

Analyses like [this recent piece](#) in *The Economist* abound: arguing that police kill people because of guns, and racism. This reasoning, while not incorrect, is only part of the story. It leaves a gaping gender blind-spot.

A gender-blind focus on shootings also hides the kinds of police violence that women do experience. After all, though [they don't often receive as much attention](#), women are also victimized by the state.

Cops aren't shooting many women, but they are [shackling pregnant inmates](#) during birth — a practice condemned as torture by the UN.

Cops aren't shooting many women, but male cops are raping us. The CATO institute found, in 2010, that sexual assault was the [second most common form](#) of police misconduct — though the more correct term would be *male* police misconduct — and that women of color are disproportionately targeted.

[Male cops are targeting marginalized women](#), including trans women, sex workers, homeless women, and teenage girls for extortion, battery, serial rape and gang rape.”The women are terrified,” [says Penny Harrington](#), the former police chief of Portland, Oregon. “Who are they going to call? It's the police who are abusing them.”

The public executions of unarmed black men and boys are horrifying and brutal. They deserve our attention. But, when we ignore gender, the particular kinds of police violence suffered by women are rendered invisible.

Cops with guns don't kill people. White male cops with guns do. And they kill men. Especially black men.

When we talk about police violence, we have got to start talking about gender.