

Policing & the Anxiety of Black Injustice

How It Started

“Why did American policing get so big, so fast? The answer, mainly, is slavery.” —JILL LEPORE
The New Yorker

■ Modern day police mentality can be traced back to the Slave Patrols, established in the Carolinas in the early 1700s, with the purpose of returning runaway slaves to their owners.

NPR | NAACP

■ **Jim Crow and August Vollmer (The Father of American Police)**—The name “Jim Crow” derived from the performances of a white American actor, Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who performed blackface throughout America and the United Kingdom in the 1800s.

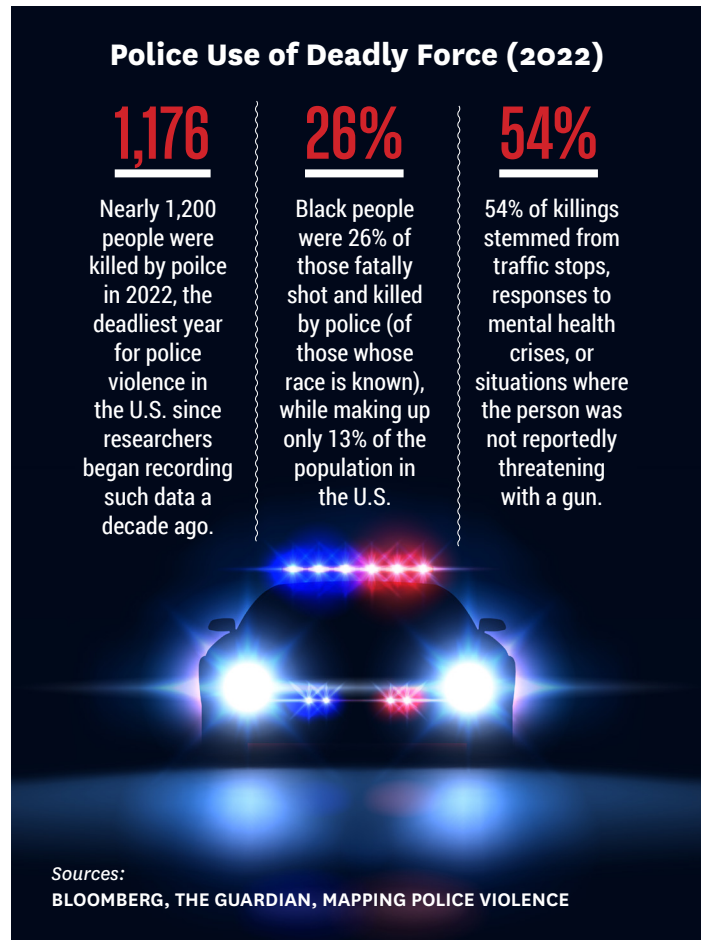
FERRIS STATE UNIVERSITY

■ Rice’s minstrel show, titled “Jump Jim Crow,” ultimately coined the name *Jim Crow* as a racial slur and term used for the Jim Crow laws of 1874.

BRITANNICA

■ Jim Crow Laws stemmed from the belief that African Americans were considered less human, and unworthy of integration. Therefore, the laws legalized racial segregation and marginalized Black people by denying them the right to vote, hold jobs, and receive an education.

HISTORY



Modern American policing began in 1909, when August Vollmer became the chief of the police department in Berkeley, California. Vollmer-era police enforced Jim Crow laws. Vollmer believed in hereditary criminality and belonged to the American Eugenics Society. He also believed in prohibiting people with disabilities from integrating into society. “During Vollmer’s time, Black people were patrolled, arrested, and indicted at disproportionate rates. After all this, social scientists, observing the number of Black people in jail, decided that, as a matter of biology, Black people were disproportionately inclined to criminality.”

THE NEW YORKER



Vollmer refashioned American police ... to use American military tactics. (Today’s police officers are disproportionately veterans of U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.) THE NEW YORKER



Perception vs. Reality

■ **What People Think:** “Most deaths at the hands of police are not the result of cops responding to or trying to prevent a murder. They occur when cops are doing other police work such as making a traffic stop, or raiding a home.”

■ **Reality:** Multiple studies have shown that police reports tend to favor the police. They also imply that the deceased was the aggressor. “When interacting with Black people, police officers seem more likely to see innocuous movements — or even efforts to comply with their orders — as threatening.”

WASHINGTON POST

3x

Black people are three times more likely to be killed by police than white people.

2013-2023; 7.08 killings per 1 million population/year

MAPPING POLICE VIOLENCE

Most Killings by Police Begin With . . .

1. Traffic stops
2. Mental health checks
3. Disturbances
4. Non-violent offenses
5. No alleged crime

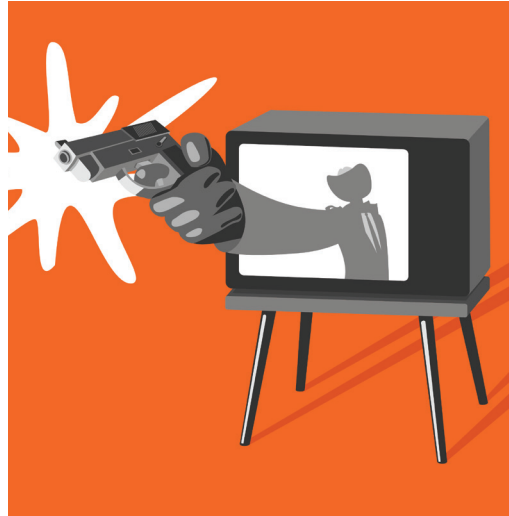
The Old Hollywood Cop Myth Machine

■ “For a century, Hollywood has been collaborating with police departments, telling stories that whitewash police shootings and valorize an action-hero style of policing.” **WASHINGTON POST**

Film and television portrayals of Black individuals committing crimes affects the larger public’s perception of Black people.

BLAKE EDWARDS

Acting Black: An Analysis of Blackness and Criminality in Film (2019)



“Black people are more likely to be unarmed and less likely to be threatening someone when killed by police.”
POLICE VIOLENCE REPORT

98%

of killings by police from 2013 to 2022 have not resulted in officers being charged with a crime.

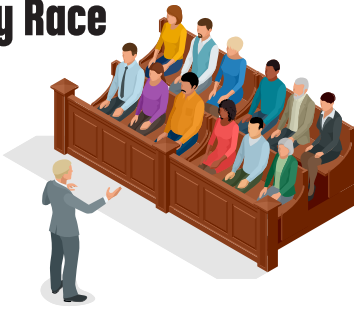
MAPPING POLICE VIOLENCE



97%

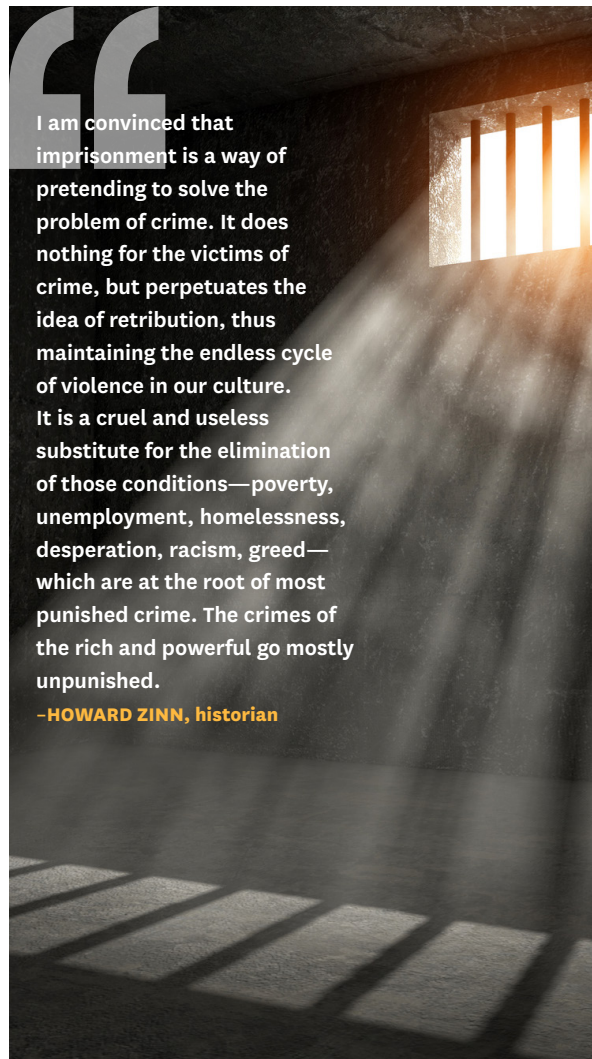
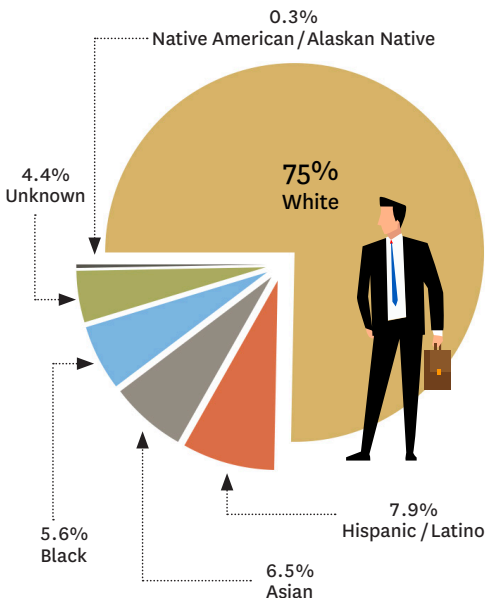
of people killed by police in 2022 involved shootings. Tasers, physical force and law-enforcement vehicles accounted for most other deaths.

Prosecutor Demographics by Race



The most common ethnicity among prosecutors is white, which makes up 75.3% of all prosecutors. Comparatively, 7.9% of prosecutors are Hispanic, 6.5% of prosecutors are Asian, and 5.6% are Black.

ZIPPPIA



I am convinced that imprisonment is a way of pretending to solve the problem of crime. It does nothing for the victims of crime, but perpetuates the idea of retribution, thus maintaining the endless cycle of violence in our culture. It is a cruel and useless substitute for the elimination of those conditions—poverty, unemployment, homelessness, desperation, racism, greed—which are at the root of most punished crime. The crimes of the rich and powerful go mostly unpunished.

—**HOWARD ZINN, historian**



“Cops may shoot and kill twice as many white people as Black, but there are about 6x as many white people as Black people in the United States.” Hispanic Americans are also killed by police at a disproportionate rate. **WASHINGTON POST**

How Negative Encounters With the Police Affect Mental Health



■ Racism disproportionately exposes people who are Black, and other people of color, to police brutality. For example, they are more likely than whites to be stopped; arrested; injured; psychologically, sexually, and emotionally assaulted; and killed by the police. **SAGE JOURNALS**

■ Higher exposure to negative encounters with the police leads to higher levels of depression, paranoia, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. **SAGE JOURNALS**

Mental Health Portrayals in Television & Film



Mental illness is predominantly portrayed in privileged majority populations. A 2021 study found that 97% of characters with mental illness were white, 79% were male. **SEATTLE ANXIETY SPECIALISTS**, *Mental Health Representation in Television & Film*

“When the media fails to portray marginalized populations experiencing mental illness, it casts mental health as a ‘Caucasian phenomenon’ and reinforces ideas in many minority populations that mental healthcare and therapy are also only for white people.” **SEATTLE ANXIETY SPECIALISTS**, *Mental Health Representation in Television & Film*

Black people are the racial demographic least likely to be depicted navigating successfully through mental health and suicidal ideation. **USC ANNENBERG**



TV Tackles Race-Based Trauma (& Some Shows That Got It Right)

“We need accurate stories that reflect the systemic lack of access to care for some Black people. But we also need stories of successful treatment and psychiatric interventions as a brave step to save a life, rather than a source of shame.” **NERDIST**



✶ There are hybrid crisis-intervention programs emerging around the U.S. to handle responses for mental illness, substance abuse, and homelessness, along with non-criminal, non-emergency police and medical calls. Contact HH&S to learn more.

HH&S can connect writers with experts, and people with lived experiences to help inform scripts and stories. Contact us at hhs@usc.edu or (213) 764-2704.