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Societal connection between blackness and criminality leads to violence against innocent

Protestors face off with Missouri State Highway Patrol troopers Monday in front of the police station in Ferguson. ROBERT COHEN / St. Louis Post-Dispatch



violence against innocent

GALLERY: Societal connection between blackness and criminality leads to

PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER

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Close your eyes. Without thinking too deeply, picture someone walking into a convenience store, gas station, or a neighborhood bodega. That person pulls out a gun and robs the clerk at gunpoint.

What did that person look like? What comes to mind when we hear words such as *violent criminals*? Are our conceptualizations any different from those of police officers?

These are questions we need to ask ourselves in the wake of last weekend's police shooting of an unarmed black teenager, Michael Brown, in Ferguson, Mo.

In instances of excessive police force, it is easy for us to blame individual officers, punish those involved, and move forward. If we want to address the problem more systematically, we can call for a reexamination of law-enforcement policies or for greater community oversight of the police, as the Committee of Seventy has done here in Philadelphia.

However, while Brown was shot by a police officer, this issue of violence against young African Americans inaccurately perceived to be a threat extends far beyond the police. The deaths of Renisha McBride in Detroit and Trayvon Martin in Florida are prime examples of how armed civilians can also pose deadly threats to black youth who make the mistake of somehow appearing dangerous.

So, one option for reducing the violence against young African Americans is to ask them to stop looking so threatening in their appearance, or better yet, do this through some sort of government policy.

Now what people consider a threatening appearance can range from wearing a hooded sweatshirt, to wearing certain colors, to merely stepping foot into a predominantly white area.

As to policies, historically we have had plenty done that is meant to regulate African Americans, including slave codes and Jim Crow laws.

Today, certain municipalities have enacted similar laws, such as bans on saggy pants, presumably in an effort to force individuals to appear more respectable and less threatening. But efforts to address this issue by regulating what African Americans wear are tantamount to victim-blaming. More important, they ignore this fact: Simply having dark skin can make a person look threatening. You can't regulate your way around that.

When I teach modern social policy, I tell my students that before we can jump to a solution, we must be clear on what we are identifying as the social problem. In this recent police shooting, there are perhaps many social problems, but the one I would like to address, the one that is as relevant in Ferguson, Mo., as it is in Philadelphia, is our general connection between blackness and criminality. This association dates back hundreds of years, and continues to be reinforced by today's media coverage of crime, as well as by the overrepresentation of blacks in our criminal justice system, despite the fact that they may not be engaging in higher levels of criminal activity.

This spring, author and activist Cornel West spoke at the University of Pennsylvania's summit on prisoner reentry and reminded us that we are all, to varying degrees, a little bit racist. That perspective is important as we consider the killing of Michael Brown, which should cause us all to think about how our long-held association between blackness and criminality puts us at risk of overreacting to a perceived threat. How do those preconceptions cause us to engage in everyday violence against black youth?

That violence can range from subtle micro-aggressions, such as following someone around a store or calling the police because a person appears suspicious, to more flagrant acts of physical violence. Even the language we use can serve as a form of violence. For example, the distraught mourners reacting to Brown's death were victims of violence when several news reports labeled them as an angry mob.

If we are truly concerned about reducing the violence experienced by young African Americans, we must challenge our preconceptions and the beliefs of those around us. We must think carefully about our language, about how labeling a group of teens as a "mob" can actually put them at grave risk.

We must also think critically about our policy responses to problems involving youth in our city. When we automatically look to the police to solve an issue, there is no way to see youth as anything but criminals.

As the saying goes, if you're holding a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.

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