

Don't shoot

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The police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, revealed a stark racial and social divide: millions of African Americans can easily imagine themselves or a loved one as the unarmed person being fired upon by police, whereas few whites can. That reality is finally more significant than the ambiguous details of what happened in Brown's fatal 90-second encounter with police officer Darren Wilson. For black Americans, the abuse of power by police is a familiar pattern, not an aberration—and it is that reality that must be acknowledged and addressed.

In one of many powerful confessions evoked by the shooting, Jonathan Capehart of the *Washington Post* recalled how his mother used to tell him “not to run in public, lest I arouse undue suspicion. How I most definitely should not run with anything in my hands, lest anyone think I stole something. The lesson included not talking back to the police, lest you give them a reason to take you to jail—or worse. And I was taught to never, ever leave home without identification.” What white children are given such instructions?

According to one poll, 45 percent of African Americans believe they have been discriminated against by the police because of their race, compared to only 7 percent of whites. Blacks are in fact much more likely to be arrested for drug use, for example, than are whites found engaged in the same activities. Even 31 percent of whites, the poll found, believe that police are more likely to use deadly force against blacks. The tensions created by such disparities are exacerbated when—as is the case in Ferguson and many cities—the police force is overwhelmingly white and the

population predominantly black.

Unlike the issue of voting rights, the racial disparities in law enforcement cannot be addressed by enacting one or even a series of laws. But reforms can be made.

The city of Ferguson has already announced that it will take some significant steps. It will create a citizen advisory board to review police actions; it will encourage police officers to live in the city; and it will seek to hire more African Americans.

Requiring police to wear and use body cameras to record their interactions with the public—a measure the Obama administration is supporting—is a further way to bring transparency to police actions. The simple act of requiring an officer to wear a name badge can humanize encounters with police.

Beyond these steps lies the daily work by which officers get to know residents and business owners and build trust through the practice of openness, dependability, and fairness. That kind of policing serves the police in the end, because officers cannot succeed at their difficult and dangerous jobs if they do not have—and have not earned—the support of the community they serve.