

1 Commentary

---

2 **Police Shootings and Race in the United States:**  
3 **Why the Perpetrator Predation Perspective Is**  
4 **Essential to I-O Psychology’s Role in Ending This**  
5 **Crisis**

Q1

6 Mindy Bergman  
7 *Texas A&M University*

8 As I write this essay in mid-September 2017, the news is reporting yet an-  
9 other tragic police shooting that led to the death of a US resident. This time,  
10 it was a deaf, nonverbal, Hispanic man in Oklahoma City, Magdiel Sanchez,  
11 who happened to be carrying a pipe that he used to fend off stray dogs when  
12 he went for walks at night (NewsOK, 2017). To the members of Mr. Sanchez’s  
13 family and community, his name is the most important part of the previous  
14 sentence, but the most terrifying part for the rest of us is the first two words:  
15 this time.

16 It is clear that there is a crisis with police shootings in the United States.  
17 There is no government database that tracks police shootings in the US  
18 across jurisdictions and types of police agencies. In response, *The Washing-*  
19 *ton Post* (n.d.a, n.d.b, n.d.c) began tracking police shootings through news  
20 media, public records, and other sources in its “Fatal Force” project. Its  
21 reporting indicates that between January 1, 2015 and September 21, 2017  
22 (the time of this writing),<sup>1</sup> 2,673 people were shot and killed by police<sup>2</sup> in  
23 the United States. To put this into perspective for an industrial and orga-  
24 nizational (I-O) psychology audience, the number of people killed annu-  
25 ally by police shootings is approximately equal to the number of people  
26 killed in work-related driving accidents or in the construction industry per  
27 year ([www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)). Of these police shooting victims, 95.7% were men; US  
28 Census 2015 projections indicate that men comprised 49.3% and females

Mindy Bergman, Texas A&M University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mindy Bergman, Texas  
A&M University. E-mail: [mindybergman@tamu.edu](mailto:mindybergman@tamu.edu)

<sup>1</sup> Between September 21 and November 6 (the time of revising this commentary), 2017, an  
additional 110 people were shot and killed by police officers.

<sup>2</sup> Note that this does not include people who were shot and not killed, or events in which  
police drew their weapons and did not fire, or events in which people were killed by police  
by other means.

Q2

1 comprised 50.7% of the US population ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)). The race com-  
 2 position of the group of victims was 48.1% White (Census: 61.7%), 24.5%  
 3 Black (Census: 12.4%), 16.6% Hispanic (Census: 17.7%), and 10.8% other or  
 4 unknown (Census: 8.2% other racial groups). Thus, as a group the victims of  
 5 these shootings are significantly more male and more Black than the general  
 6 US population.

7 There is also clear evidence that police shootings occur more frequently  
 8 by orders of magnitude in the US compared to other Western countries.  
 9 *The Guardian*, a UK-based news company, developed a database called “The  
 10 Counted” that tracked police shootings in several countries (Lartey, 2015).  
 11 In a telling passage in Lartey’s reporting, it states: “The US is not just some  
 12 outlier in terms of police violence when compared with countries of similar  
 13 economic and political standing. America is the outlier—and this is what a  
 14 crisis looks like.”

#### 15 **Victim Blaming in Police Shootings**

Q3

16 In this commentary, I agree with Cortina, Rabelo, and Holland’s (2018)  
 17 perspective that victim precipitation models are regressive, troubling, and  
 18 wrong. Cortina et al.’s critique of the victim precipitation model sheds light  
 19 on why some police agencies are slow to reform and why the public is slow  
 20 to demand change: focusing on the victim when explaining the cause of the  
 21 shooting event. Some of this arises from the news media’s creed of being neu-  
 22 tral in reporting about events, so they provide information about both the  
 23 shooter and the victim. It also arises from the continued reification of victim  
 24 precipitation in our society; that is, the media reflects our national conversa-  
 25 tion about police shootings by noting whether the victim was armed, fleeing,  
 26 and so on.

Q4

27 Further, victim blaming arises from individuals’ attributional systems  
 28 (Gilbert, 1998). By focusing on victim characteristics, people are able to con-  
 29 struct internal attributions about the victim for the police shooting; this is  
 30 further bolstered by the number of people who every day encounter police  
 31 and who are not shot and killed, so our attributional system discourages ex-  
 32 ternal attributions relative to the victim, because the victim becomes the dis-  
 33 tinctive part of the story (Kelley, 1967). From the police agency standpoint,  
 34 fatal police shootings are not very common within any particular agency  
 35 relative to their number of contacts with civilians, so the shooting is the un-  
 36 usual event that needs to be explained (i.e., external to the police agency)  
 37 rather than indicative of policing processes.

38 Although it is uncomfortable to adopt the phrase “perpetrator preda-  
 39 tion” (Cortina, 2017) when considering police behaviors, this model is more  
 40 appropriate and useful for understanding how and why police shootings  
 41 occur. Note that I am not claiming that police are predators looking to

1 intentionally kill citizens, although this sometimes happens (Berman, Low-  
2 ery, & deGrandpre, 2017). Instead, what I am suggesting is that our ongoing  
3 preoccupation with the victims of these shootings results in us failing to ask  
4 the most important questions that will have the greatest lasting, positive im-  
5 pact on society. It is not just that the shooting victims did certain things,  
6 but also that policing policies, training, and practices lead police to see these  
7 events and people as threatening at a level that requires deadly force as a re-  
8 sponse, resulting in a shooting. To change the police shooting problem in the  
9 United States, we need to focus on why these events are seen as so threaten-  
10 ing, what responses are expected and trained for, and what alternatives could  
11 be created in their place. This is not to say that all police aggression against  
12 suspects—fatal or not, shooting or not—is unjustified; certainly, some cases  
13 must exist in which a police officer would be grievously injured or die un-  
14 less the suspects were somehow stopped first. But evidence from the rest of  
15 the world indicates that although a fatal police shooting might be sufficient,  
16 it most certainly is not necessary. To address the police shooting crisis, we  
17 must adopt a perpetrator predation perspective.

#### 18 **Race, Racism, and Victim Blaming**

19 Thus far, I've noted statistics whereby the victims of these shootings are dis-  
20 proportionately Black people, and in particular Black men, but I did not  
21 comment on the role of race in these fatal incidents. Eradicating the police  
22 shooting crisis in the US will require a number of changes, and notably it will  
23 require changing the reactions by police to Black men.

24 Cortina et al. (2018) noted that the history of the victim precipitation  
25 model is littered with sexism and rape mythologies, which serves to support  
26 the sex-based social hierarchy. I argue that victim blaming and the adoption  
27 of the victim precipitation model also serves to support the race-based so-  
28 cial hierarchy. In the US, the modern race-based social hierarchy reflects the  
29 terrible history of the enslavement of Black people and the formal and legal  
30 disenfranchisement of their rights and equal participation in society until the  
31 passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964; in the approximately 50 years follow-  
32 ing this period, Blacks in the US—and other racial and ethnic minorities—  
33 have had legal equality, but the promise of the Civil Rights Act has not been  
34 borne out in practice.

35 There is ample evidence that White people perceive Black people as  
36 threatening and as more threatening than people of other races (e.g., Cor-  
37 rell, Judd, Park, & Wittennbrink, 2002). These effects are amplified when  
38 the White person has negative racial attitudes or beliefs (Correll et al.,  
39 2002). Similarly, White medical students and healthcare providers believe  
40 that Black people can tolerate pain better than White people, resulting in  
41 lower pain modulation efforts; these White people's beliefs are based in other

1 erroneous beliefs about Black people’s biology and their biological differ-  
2 ences from Whites (Hoffman, Tawalter, Axt, & Oliver, 2016). It is clear that  
3 racism is alive and well in the United States, and White people perceive Black  
4 people as both inferior and threatening.

5 How we as a society came to the point where White people perceive  
6 Black people as so threatening, when history indicates the opposite to be  
7 true, is well-beyond the scope of this short commentary. But suffice it to say  
8 that up until 160 years ago, Black people were often property in the United  
9 States, so their potential rebellion was personally threatening and their es-  
10 cape was economically threatening to White people; since the end of slavery,  
11 their social, political, and economic rise (whether real or perceived) threat-  
12 ened White people’s social, political, and economic dominance (which still  
13 exists).

14 By blaming the victims—especially Black victims—for their own fatal  
15 police shootings, we continue to reify the race-based social hierarchy in the  
16 US and ignore the role that police practices, police training, and police and  
17 societal attitudes play in perceiving threat from Black persons, especially  
18 Black men. At the individual level, this again probably arises in part from  
19 a desire to self-protect via our internal attributions about the victim; it al-  
20 lows us to feel individually safer. But it also arises from the racialized ideas  
21 that exist in US culture. At a societal level, victim precipitation permits us to  
22 maintain the racial status quo and, for those of us who are rarely targeted by  
23 racial prejudice and enjoy the fruits of a race-based social hierarchy, to ig-  
24 nore the racism that exists in the US. By focusing on the victim, we can rest  
25 assured that this shooting—and that shooting, and the next, and the next  
26 again, and so on—was not because of systematic and systemic problem but  
27 because of this one bad actor who brought it on himself. It lets us off the hook  
28 of confronting individual, systematic, and institutional racism. If we were to  
29 change to a perpetrator predation perspective, we would start to ask better  
30 questions about police shootings that could get to the heart of this crisis and  
31 begin to resolve it.

### 32 **The Perpetrator Predation Perspective and I-O Psychology**

33 What can I-O psychologists do to help solve these problems or at least reduce  
34 their frequency? The answer is: quite a lot (Ruggs et al., 2016). When we  
35 adopt the predator predation framework, then nearly every question about  
36 police shootings belongs in the realm of I-O psychology. Instead of asking  
37 questions like “What weapon did the victim have at the time of the shoot-  
38 ing?” or “Why was the victim fleeing from the police?” we would ask ques-  
39 tions like “What training do police officers have to defuse situations in which  
40 suspects have weapons and what can we do to improve that training to re-  
41 duce killings?” or “What procedures should police follow when a suspect is

1 fleeing?” We could also research selection issues, examining whether there  
 2 are there some people who are less likely to perceive Black men as threatening  
 3 (and therefore are less likely to shoot them) and whether some people are less  
 4 likely to engage in police aggression than others (Bergman, Walker, & Jean,  
 5 2016). I-O psychologists would be able to aid police agencies in creating bet-  
 6 ter criterion measures that could include police aggression as an indicator  
 7 of poor performance. By adopting the predator predation framework, I-O  
 8 psychologists will provide better solutions to the police shooting problem.

9 Additionally, as scientists, we have a responsibility to frame our research  
 10 through the perpetrator predation lens rather than the victim precipitation  
 11 lens. First, as Cortina et al. (2018) note, the perpetrator predation model  
 12 is better science than the victim precipitation view, as it avoids the criterion  
 13 behavior as essential to creating and defining the process. Further, as Cortina  
 14 et al. note, this reframing can result in the same empirical approaches, but  
 15 the way that we talk about it, where the onus of responsibility lies, and the  
 16 practical solutions that we derive from the research will differ. As scientists,  
 17 we must have constant vigilance regarding our words and framings of the  
 18 perceptions that people hold about others. As an example, here is a short  
 19 passage from Hall, Hall, and Perry (2016):

20 In a series of studies, Goff, Jackson, Di Leone, Culotta, and DiTomaso (2014) instructed both  
 21 undergraduate student and police officer participants to evaluate young Black, White, or Latino  
 22 suspects and estimate their age and culpability for their actions. Black boys were perceived to  
 23 be older and less innocent than White boys, and this “adult-like” quality made them appear to  
 24 be more appropriate candidates for greater use of police force. (p. 176)

25 Note that in the latter sentence, the authors’ framing makes it seem as though  
 26 the “adult-like quality” belongs to the Black boys rather than to the percep-  
 27 tual systems of the participants. The use of the passive voice, although com-  
 28 mon in academic writing, removes the responsible party (i.e., participants)  
 29 from the sentence and places blame on the victims (i.e., Black boys). This  
 30 type of writing is insidious, and its presence normalizes the victim as blame-  
 31 ful and the perpetrators and perceivers as blameless. Although such language  
 32 might be difficult for us to recognize due to its normalization through our  
 33 writing practices and our own attributional tendencies about victims, as sci-  
 34 entists we are required to rise above folk psychological explanations for phe-  
 35 nomena. This is a basic ethical responsibility.

### 36 Conclusion

37 As Cortina et al. (2018) note, I-O psychology has been doubling down on  
 38 the victim precipitation model rather than joining the vast majority of social  
 39 sciences in their acceptance of the predator predation worldview. This focus  
 40 on victim characteristics, absent the examination of perpetrator systems, re-  
 41 sults in narrow and impoverished—if not outright erroneous—explanations

Q6

Q7

1 of the root cause of abusive or violent events. Herein, I argued that this prob-  
 2 lem extends to how I-O psychology can help police organizations and the  
 3 communities they serve, such that failure to adopt the predator predation  
 4 model will limit our ability to create meaningful and lasting change. I-O psy-  
 5 chologists should be leaders in police reform because of our skill set, but until  
 6 we embrace the predator predation model, we will not be.

## 7 References

- 8 Bergman, M. E., Walker, J. M., & Jean, V. A. (2016). A simple solution to policing problems: Women!  
 9 *Industrial and Organizational Psychology: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 9, 590–597.
- 10 Berman, M., Lowery, W., & deGrandpre, A. (September 16, 2016). Police and protesters clash in  
 11 St. Louis after former officer who shot black driver acquitted on murder charges. *Washington*  
 12 *Post* [online]. Retrieved from: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/15/st-louis-tenses-for-verdict-in-murder-trial-of-former-police-officer/?utm_term=.1aa95a470941)  
 13 [09/15/st-louis-tenses-for-verdict-in-murder-trial-of-former-police-officer/?utm\\_term=](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/15/st-louis-tenses-for-verdict-in-murder-trial-of-former-police-officer/?utm_term=.1aa95a470941)  
 14 [.1aa95a470941](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2017/09/15/st-louis-tenses-for-verdict-in-murder-trial-of-former-police-officer/?utm_term=.1aa95a470941)
- 15 Correll, J., Park, B., Judd, C. M., & Wittenbrink, B. (2002). The police officer's dilemma: using ethnicity  
 16 to disambiguate potentially threatening individuals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*,  
 17 83(6), 1314–1329.
- 18 Cortina, L. M. (2017). From victim precipitation to perpetrator predation: Toward a new paradigm  
 19 for understanding workplace aggression. In N. Bowling & M. S. Herscovis (Eds.), *Research and*  
 20 *theory on workplace aggression* (pp. 121–135). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- 21 Cortina, L. M., Rabelo, V. C., & Holland, K. J. (2018). Beyond blaming the victim: Toward a more  
 22 progressive understanding of workplace mistreatment. *Industrial and Organizational Psychol-*  
 23 *ogy: Perspectives on Science and Practice*, 11(1), XXX–XXX.
- 24 Hoffman, K. M., Trawalter, S., Axt, J. R., & Oliver, M. N. (2016). Racial bias in pain assessment and  
 25 treatment recommendations, and false beliefs about biological differences between Blacks and  
 26 Whites. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 113(16), 4296–4301.
- 27 Kelley, H. H. (1967). Attribution theory in social psychology. Paper presented at the 15th annual Ne-  
 28 braska symposium on motivation. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- 29 Lartey, J. (2015, June 9). By the numbers: US police kill more in days than other countries do in  
 30 years. *The Guardian* [online]. Retrieved from [https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/09/the-counted-police-killings-us-vs-other-countries)  
 31 [09/the-counted-police-killings-us-vs-other-countries](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jun/09/the-counted-police-killings-us-vs-other-countries)
- 32 NewsOK. (2017, September 20). Deaf man shot, killed by police in SE OKC Tuesday. *NewsOK* [online].  
 33 Retrieved from [http://newsok.com/police-officers-involved-in-fatal-oklahoma-city-shooting/](http://newsok.com/police-officers-involved-in-fatal-oklahoma-city-shooting/article/5564788)  
 34 [article/5564788](http://newsok.com/police-officers-involved-in-fatal-oklahoma-city-shooting/article/5564788)
- 35 Quillian, L., & Pager, D. (2001). Black neighbors, higher crime? The role of racial stereotypes in eval-  
 36 uations of neighborhood crime. *American Journal of Sociology*, 107, 717–767.
- 37 Ruggs, E. N., Hebl, M. R., Rabelo, V. C., Weaver, K. B., Kovacs, J., & Kemp, A. S. (2016). Baltimore is  
 38 burning: Can I-O psychologists help extinguish the flames? *Industrial and Organizational Psy-*  
 39 *chology*, 9(3), 525–547.
- 40 *The Washington Post*. (n.d.a). 2015 *Washington Post database of police shootings*. Retrieved from [https:](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/)  
 41 [//www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings/)
- 42 *The Washington Post*. (n.d.b). *Police shootings 2016 database*. Retrieved from [https://www.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/)  
 43 [washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2016/)
- 44 *The Washington Post*. (n.d.c). *Police shootings 2017 database*. Retrieved from [https://www.](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/)  
 45 [washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/national/police-shootings-2017/)

Q8

Q9