

Recommended Ferguson reading

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

December 2, 2014

[These are wise words from Chris Rock](#), words that bring to mind the point often made by Ta-Nehisi Coates, among others: that while *race* may be a construct, this doesn't change the all-too-clear reality of *racism*. Here's Rock, doing that not-this-but-that thing [he's always done so well](#):

To say Obama is progress is saying that he's the first black person that is qualified to be president. That's not black progress. That's white progress. There's been black people qualified to be president for hundreds of years... My kids are smart, educated, beautiful, polite children. There have been smart, educated, beautiful, polite black children for hundreds of years. The advantage that my children have is that my children are encountering the nicest white people that America has ever produced. Let's hope America keeps producing nicer white people....

We treat racism in this country like it's a style that America went through. Like flared legs and lava lamps. *Oh, that crazy thing we did. We were hanging black people.* We treat it like a fad instead of a disease that eradicates millions of people. You've got to get it at a lab, and study it, and see its origins, and see what it's immune to and what breaks it down.

And this is a profound and personal meditation [by Kiese Laymon](#), a fiction writer and English professor (in the Hudson Valley, not the Deep South!):

The fourth time a Poughkeepsie police officer told me that my Vassar College Faculty ID could make everything OK was three years ago. I was driving down Hooker Avenue. When the white police officer, whose head was way too small for his neck, asked if my truck was stolen, I laughed, said no, and shamefully showed him my license and my ID, just like [Lanre Akinsiku](#). The ID, which ensures that I can spend the rest of my life in a lush state park with fat fearless squirrels, surrounded by enlightened white

folks who love talking about Jon Stewart, Obama, and civility, has been washed so many times it doesn't lie flat.

Ezra Klein makes a hugely important point about [the problem in research of controlling for the very things you're researching](#):

People pulled over for speeding tickets are searched much less often than people pulled over for non-speeding violations like broken taillights. The researchers find that minority drivers are much likelier than white drivers to be pulled over for those non-speeding offenses.

The result is that when you control for type of stop, some of the effect of race disappears. But by controlling for type of stop, you might actually just be controlling for the effect of race, which is the thing you're trying to measure in the first place. The researchers know this. "The findings do not address the question of *why* minorities are more likely to be stopped for nonspeeding offenses." The italics, by the way, are in the original paper. The researchers are frustrated, too.

Or take the [Department of Justice study](#) that controls for type of drug use, frequency of drug use, and location of drug use. Once you account for all that, black people go from being four times as likely to get arrested for drug crimes to twice as likely.

Frequency of drug use deserves its control status here. Someone who uses drugs weekly is likelier to get arrested than someone who uses them monthly. But the other two controls don't look like controls at all.... We police black communities more heavily and we are more aggressive about enforcing drug laws against drugs that black people use more frequently. Controlling for those facts isn't helping you isolate the role racial discrimination plays in drug enforcement. Those facts *are* the role that racial discrimination plays in drug enforcement.

And this [powerful first-person story](#) from August has been making the rounds again after last week's failure to indict: a white dad lost his son to police violence, took up the cause of outside review for such incidents, and got a state-level bill passed and signed (by GOP all star Scott Walker). Here's how Michael Bell starts his story:

After police in Kenosha, Wis., shot my 21-year-old son to death outside his house ten years ago — and then immediately cleared themselves of all wrongdoing — an African-American man approached me and said: “If they can shoot a white boy like a dog, imagine what we’ve been going through.”....

Yes, there is good reason to think that many of these unjustifiable homicides by police across the country are racially motivated. But there is a lot more than that going on here. Our country is simply not paying enough attention to the terrible lack of accountability of police departments and the way it affects all of us—regardless of race or ethnicity. Because if a blond-haired, blue-eyed boy — that was my son, Michael — can be shot in the head under a street light with his hands cuffed behind his back, in front of five eyewitnesses (including his mother and sister), and his father was a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel who flew in three wars for his country — that’s me — and I still couldn’t get anything done about it, then Joe the plumber and Javier the roofer aren’t going to be able to do anything about it either.

Bell did eventually get something done about it—for future victims, if not for his own son—and he understands keenly both that the problem of police impunity is not *only* about race and that he probably would never had gotten his bill through if he looked like Michael Brown’s parents. He is, however, like them in another way: he’s one of those whose life has been shattered by police violence, a group that’s disproportionately but not exclusively nonwhite. And so, solidarity—by way of a harder but surer path than most of us travel.

And solidarity—the difficult question of a “we”—is what Bromleigh McCleneghan has in mind in [her *Century* post last week](#):

The problems of institutional racism, of white privilege, of the shooting deaths of unarmed civilians—by police or vigilantes or gang members or gunmen in movie theaters in schools—are things that we all need to overcome, everybody who lives in Chicago or Missouri or the United States. Our world is rendered worse for their continued existence....

The Ferguson story is rife with victim blaming. *He had committed a robbery! They are destroying property.* This is how we discourage people from speaking out against injustice. A recent story notes that perhaps the accusations against Bill Cosby failed to gain traction because the women were ["imperfect victims, as victims so often are."](#)

This week I've been thinking about the notion of perfect victims alongside the Christian claim that Jesus was without sin. Such a claim is not a denial of the fullness of Jesus's humanity, but simply a distinction: he was the only perfect victim. The rest of us, should tragedy befall us, will always be imperfect victims.

It's human to try to make sense of the world, to make meaning out of tragedy, but blaming people for the injustices wrought on them isn't a morally neutral thing. It's sin.