The Symbolic Assailant Revisited: Tamir Rice, John Crawford and Jonathan Ferrell

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Abstract: The well-publicized deaths of several African Americans—Tamir Rice, John Crawford, Jonathan Ferrell— at the hands of police stem from tragic interactions predicated upon well understood practices and attitudes that police scholars have been writing about for much of the last 50 years. In this regard, the construction of the symbolic assailant is especially relevant. This paper explores the societal roots of the black symbolic assailant in contemporary American policing. The construction of African Americans (both men and women) as symbolic assailants is one of the most important factors characterizing police interaction with African Americans. I argue that current strategies for ending police violence do not sufficiently address the prominence of the symbolic assailant in proactive policing strategies. The paper suggests an unusual solution to commonly understood mechanisms of addressing police violence. Based on my experience with police who had productive relationships with crime victims of color, I suggest a reorientation of policing practices and the development of a series of alternate routines predicated on a more reactive model of policing. The paper closes with a few thoughts on the implications of the current crises of legitimacy in the African American community.