

# When the only difference between a 'prankster' and a 'criminal' is race

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## Ruby Hamad

Perhaps the most troubling thing about the video that has emerged of staff at Apple's Highpoint store in Melbourne ejecting a group of black schoolboys was the casual way in which a staff member told them that [security guards were "just worried you might steal something."](#)

Just worried. No big deal. You know how it is. Black people steal all the time; you can't blame us for being careful can you? And so we have another case of people of colour criminalised for doing the everyday things white people take for granted. Yet another incident proving that racism, far from being a relic of a less enlightened past, permeates every aspect of our society, underpinning how we see and respond to each other.

Even the act of breastfeeding in public can provoke vastly different reactions [depending on the race of the woman doing it](#). But that pales in comparison to how it affects our perspective on crime and punishment.

When 25-year-old white woman Sarah Finn [pushed a senior police officer into a bush](#) at last week's Melbourne Cup, the general reaction was [amusement](#) coupled with [puzzlement](#) over her "bizarre" and "odd" behaviour. Yes, Finn was ever so politely arrested, but the general consensus was that she was a prankster who meant no harm.

That may be so, but most people of colour who watched that video immediately recognised two things:

1. A brown or black woman would not have been treated so lightly by police, and
2. A brown or black woman would have generated a much more hostile reaction from the public.

Be honest. If that had been an Aboriginal woman, or a Muslim woman in hijab, would the response have been so jolly? Or would we, a full week later, still be embroiled in a handwringing debate about Islam's compatibility with Australian values or the criminal tendencies of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders people?

Before you answer, [watch this video](#).

In March of this year, CCTV footage emerged of the 2012 arrest of 17-year-old Aboriginal girl Melissa Dunn, after she had slammed her fist into a police car. Dunn was chased by police who pulled her hair, knocked her to the ground, and sat on her back as they handcuffed her wrists.

The arrest was so violent her arm was broken. Although ultimately cleared of resisting arrest, Melissa Dunn committed suicide just [three days after her trial](#).

This is what we talk about when we talk about white privilege. In the days after Finn pushed officer Steve Cooper into that bush he [admitted to being teased about the incident](#), because being knocked over a white woman is *tres embarrassant*. Meanwhile an Aboriginal teenager is regarded as so dangerous, she has to be tackled by multiple officers for merely hitting a parked car.

The outcome of all this is that the relative leniency with which white people are treated, both by the law and by public opinion, means they have a hard time believing people of colour when we when we talk about our own experiences and fears.

How many non-Indigenous Australians know what it's like to be in danger of getting locked up just because they didn't pay a fine or two? What is their relative risk of dying in custody?

How many white people [expect to be regularly stopped](#) at airport security [for a "random" check](#)?

This discrepancy also governs our reactions to victims of crime. In the US, black women are decrying the lack of attention given to the trial of police officer Daniel Holtzclaw, who allegedly sexually assaulted eight black women. Holtzclaw is accused of grossly misusing his power, targeting vulnerable women (some who had been in trouble with the law) to minimise his chances of getting caught.

Would the reaction be different if at least some of the victims were white? Writer Michelle Denise Jackson [thinks so](#), "How is it possible that there is no national feminist outcry, like that surrounding...Columbia student Emma Sulkowicz and the Steubenville rape case? Why is it so easy for us to ignore when Black women suffer violence?"

Australians are no strangers to ignoring violence inflicted on black women. Aboriginal victims of murder, [rape](#), and domestic violence get less media coverage, and police often act with [far less urgency](#) when Aboriginal children go missing. Most recently, Queensland police waited six days before appealing for public information regarding the disappearance of 12-year-old Tiahleigh Palmer whose body was later found in the Pimpama River. As Louise Taylor [wrote so eloquently](#) in *The Guardian*:

"Police didn't wait 6 days to seek public assistance on Daniel Morcombe. They didn't wait six days for [Jill Meagher](#). They didn't wait 6 days for [Allison Baden-Clay](#). And rightly so; somebody had to know where they were and the public wanted accountability."

And there it is; the public wants accountability, but only for certain victims and certain perpetrators. The upshot of all this is that, despite our professed belief in equality and tolerance, our society still privileges white people. We remain conditioned to see white people as naturally innocent, benevolent, and worthy, while brown and black people are

regarded as threatening, dangerous, and are subsequently criminalised, sometimes even [from the moment they enter pre-school](#).

White privilege is real and it affects all of us. And while many white people may disagree with this, that's only because they have grown so accustomed to it, they don't even realise it's there.