

# **The Reality of Percentage Bullying: The Unseen Dangers of Associating Percentages with Facts**

## **by Boran Göher**

Despite making up only 13% of the general population, African-Americans are responsible for 50% of all violent crime committed in the United States. Although none of us is a racist here, it sounds like a pretty damning case against Black people, does it not? No matter how you feel about the issue, you cannot deny that Black people just seem to have a knack for violence. After all, what argument can you present against cold, hard facts?

You might have heard arguments similar to the above paragraph, most of them heinously reaching the conclusion that Black people are somehow inferior or may be detrimental to society. Hopefully, you recognize in your heart that the sentiment is built on a shaky basis even if you cannot refute the so-called “cold, hard facts”. The quotation marks might have given away that I do not at all think they are cold, hard facts, and I will be explaining why I think that way, but that is not so important right now. Let us say that the first sentence of this article is 100% factual. Namely, let us say that “Despite making up only 13% of the general population, African-Americans are responsible for 50% of all violent crime committed in the United States.”. Even if this were the case, do you not find it odd to jump straight to the conclusion that African-Americans are naturally prone to violence, without even considering other possible factors that could lead to such a discrepancy. A very obvious counter-argument is poverty. Black Americans are more likely to be in poverty compared to Whites. Since we know that people in poverty are more likely to commit a violent crime, we can turn the conclusion around, and instead of “proving” why some racism is “justified”, “the facts” now tell us that the problem at hand is caused by racism. This argument is very crude and simple, but it is still not accounted for in the first paragraph, but why?

Indeed, if you are trying to reach a conclusion, one would think that you would at the very least guard against the most basic counter-argument. But many people who argue in the same lines as the first paragraph do not see a reason to do so. Then why do not they feel such a need? Well, even if they do not guard against that counter-argument, they can simply penetrate with the weight of “the facts” they have provided. If you simply have enough “fact power”, and you reach a possible conclusion quickly enough, it will look as if you have put out an impenetrable argument using facts and logic. Besides, if you present people with a fact that they have never heard of before, most would simply take it as truth and agree with your conclusion, or perhaps they will try to argue their way around it. Trying to dispute the fact would be an undesirable strategy for most people for two reasons. Firstly, it is not very easy to dispute such a claim. You have to spend some time on research, and you most likely do not have that time, at least not that much time to spend on researching this topic. The second hardship is that you are a newcomer to this debate. Your efforts might well be useless if this claim has already been debated and stood the test of time. In that case, you would only be embarrassing yourself. You could try to debunk the claim, but you would be risking your dignity. We know that most people are risk-averse so it comes as no surprise that people would not be willing to take that risk.

So, simply by using the power of perceived facts, demagogues are able to rubbish their way into racist conclusions. But how do they generate that power? Sure, the sentence is worded like a researched fact, and that does help their case, but you could do that with any sentence. What is the difference then? I propose that the integral element of this shock-and-deceive tactic is the percentages. The sentence in question contains not one, but two percentages. And they are set up perfectly. The first one is a very simple and innocent statistic, nobody would really lie about this, so it is a great opener for the next thing that comes, namely the part that claims: "African-Americans are responsible for 50% of all violent crime committed in the United States.". This is utter gibberish. But you might be inclined to think otherwise with the overall sentence structure and the juxtaposition of the percentages. And that is exactly the right position for you to arrive at faulty conclusions.

You must realize by now that the tactic used here is not arguing or even appealing to emotions or common sense. It is simple bullying. The racist in our example gives you an uncounterable shock, then runs to conclusions and declares themselves the winner of the argument whilst you are still paralyzed, all the while trying to force their toxic opinions onto you. You do not have the tools to fight back, but the reason you are in the weaker position is completely arbitrary and the whole affair is unjust. You can really see the parallels to bullying. This time they do not want your lunch money, they just want to bully you into submission and admittance. And also realize that the fact does not even have to be false. You could very well arrive at a false conclusion from factual claims so long as you blaze through the arguments to arrive at your desired point and then close your ears with your hands and pretend not to hear any objections. It sounds stupid on paper, but it is a surprisingly effective debate tactic in person. The fact being false is just the icing on the cake. Speaking of false facts, I promised to demonstrate how the very first sentence of this article is not very factual at all, so let us shortly do that.

First of all, let us lay out the sentence. "Despite making up only 13% of the general population, African-Americans are responsible for 50% of all violent crime committed in the United States.". As mentioned before, the first part looks very innocent and this time, looks do not deceive, African-Americans really do make up roughly 13% of the population in the U.S (if the right time period is considered of course.). Now, the second part is not so nice. Firstly, what even does "crime committed" mean? There is no way that we can accurately know the numbers of actual crimes committed. You can either know arrests for particular crimes or perhaps the number of guilty verdicts for particular crimes. Notice that either of those options leaves room for human error and bias, and immediately opens up new avenues to attack the claim, such as the judiciary system being biased against Black people. Second, what constitutes a violent crime? It is sometimes a well-defined term within local systems, but if you are making such a large-scoped claim, you should be specifying which definition you are going with. Thirdly, a recursive point. This sentence is sometimes framed as the stats for murder and manslaughter arrest rates. If that is the case we must once again bring up that the police are biased against Black people, so the arrest rates are less than likely to be fair. In addition, is it not very deceptive to try and use this statistic as indicative of all crimes in this case? Lastly, the elephant in the room: That 50% is wrong no matter how you spin your words, it is a cherry-picked statistic from a much older time, constructed from very specific data. [\(1\)](#)

To finish up, I want to present a less nuanced example of percentage bullying. You might have seen the mention of some 41% when transphobes are arguing with trans allies and, especially, trans people. It is generally followed by how being transgender is a disease or unnatural, and how the statistics prove that. You might be wondering what this 41% alludes to. Well according to transphobes, it is the rate of suicide across all transgender people. They use the unusually high rates of suicide to argue against the prospect of people being transgender. Since the argument here is much less logical than the one with the crime rates, this statistic does not work as well in trying to force people into your beliefs, but it does work to silence the opposition. It is hard for trans people to argue against this, especially since it is highlighting the possibility of their own suicides, and it does so while the opposing side uses it to argue against their very existence. Again, the power of the association of percentages with factuality comes into play as trans people choose silence as a result of the outright shock this “fact” delivers. And if that is not bullying, and a very serious case of it, I do not know what is. A small note, this “fact” is wrong as well. One study indeed found a rate of 41% of attempted suicides amongst a few thousand trans participants, but generalizing it to all trans people and claiming the number represents successful suicides is ignorant at best. [\(2\)](#)

In the end, we should all be wary of “facts” we see get thrown around in conversations, especially online, and try not to be deceived by the magical power of percentages. The responsibility does not end there, of course, one should also try to help people being bullied by those wielding the power of percentages for their evil purposes. The last two sentences are very corny, but I do stand with the message contained within them. And as much as we have talked about percentages in this article, I believe every reader has understood that this is a general problem with the misuse of data in general. We should not allow ourselves or other people to be bullied into submission or silence by people who use distorted pieces of data as weapons to use against their opponents rather than seeking out a correct conclusion through correct data and meticulous argumentation.