

Examining the Prevalence of Deaths from Police Use of Force

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Public Concerns



Community reactions to three deaths of African-American males by police officers in the last year have raised public concerns nationwide about the prevalence of police use of deadly force generally, and police use of deadly force against African-American men specifically.

Research Questions

This analysis sought to answer five research questions:

- How many deaths occur annually from police use of force?
- How does the frequency of deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?
- How many deaths of black men occur annually from police use of force?
- How does the frequency of black male deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?
- How often should the police legitimately be using lethal force?

The Data

- The data consisted of all 56,259 homicides that were discovered between January 1, 2009 and December 31, 2012.
- This is the most recent federal data available on all homicides reported within the United States.
- Homicide is defined as the intentional or negligent killing of one person by another. It can include legal killings (such as justifiable homicide), negligent accidents (such as a child playing with a gun), and criminal killings (such as murder).

The Data

- The data for this analysis came from the 2009-2012 Uniform Crime Report's Supplemental Homicide Reports published annually by the federal government.
- During this 4-year period, a total of 56,259 homicide victims were reported in the U.S.
- The circumstances of these homicides were examined and compared to U.S. Center for Disease Control data on other causes of death, such as suicide and motor vehicle accidents. They were also compared to National Weather Service data on people struck by lightning.

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- Of the 56,259 homicides from 2009-2012, 1,491 were the result of police use of force.
- By comparison during that same time period:
 - 755 were the result of negligent accident homicides (i.e., child playing with a gun)
 - 1,120 were justifiable homicides by citizens acting in self-defense
 - 52,893 were criminal homicides (murders)

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- This suggests yearly averages of:
 - **372 persons killed each year by police use of force**
- Compare this to the following averages:
 - 189 persons killed each year in negligent accidents
 - 280 persons killed each year in justifiable homicides by citizens acting in self-defense
 - 13,223 persons killed each year in criminal homicides (murders & manslaughters)

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- This suggests yearly averages of:
 - **372 persons killed each year by police use of force**
- Compare this to these additional averages:
 - 35,900 persons killed each year in the U.S. in motor vehicle accidents*
 - 38,364 persons commit suicide in the U.S. each year**
 - 373 persons are struck by lightning in the U.S. each year***

* National Safety Council, Itasca, IL, Injury Facts, (2012). <http://www.nsc.org>

** <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/statistics/aag.html>

*** <http://www.usatoday.com/weather/resources/basics/wlightning.htm>

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- As the U.S. population is 316,128,839 persons, here are annual percentages:
 - 0.012% of the U.S. population committed suicide last year
 - 0.011% of the U.S. population died in a vehicle crash last year
 - 0.004% of the U.S. population died in a criminal homicide last year
 - **0.00012% of the U.S. population died from police use of force last year**
 - **0.00012% of the U.S. population was struck by lightning last year**
 - 0.00009% of the U.S. population was legally killed by a private citizen in self-defense last year

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- *Research Question 1: How many deaths occur annually from police use of force?*
- Answer: On average, 372 persons die each year in the U.S. from police use of force. This is less than the passenger capacity of a Boeing 777 airliner.



Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- *Research Question 2: How does the frequency of deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?*
- Answer: People are 103 times more likely to commit suicide, 97 times more likely to be killed in a vehicle crash, and 34 times more likely to be murdered by a criminal than they are to die from police use of force.

Prevalence of Police-Related Killings

- *Research Question 2: How does the frequency of deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?*
- Answer: Deaths from police use of force occur about as frequently as being struck by lightning.



Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- *Research Question: How many deaths of black men occur annually from police use of force?*
- *Research Question: How does the frequency of black male deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?*

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- Of the 1,491 persons that died from police use of force from 2009-2012:
 - *915 (61.4%) were white males*
 - 481 (32.2%) were black males
 - 48 (3.2%) were males of other races
 - 28 (1.9%) were white females
 - 15 (1.1%) were black females
 - 4 (0.2%) were females of other races
- *The majority of those who died from police use of force during this time period were white males, not black males.*

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- Of the 56,259 homicides from 2009-2012, 19,000 (33.8%) were killings of black males.
- Comparisons by types of homicides of black males:
 - *481 (2.5%) were the result of police use of force*
 - 152 (0.8%) were the result of a negligent accident homicides (i.e., child playing with a gun)
 - 648 (3.4%) were the result of a justifiable homicides by private citizens acting in self-defense
 - 17,719 (93.3%) were criminal homicides (murders)

Private citizens killed a quarter more black males in justifiable homicides than did police use of force

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- While only 6% of the U.S. population is identified as black and male, 57.9% of the persons legally killed by a private citizen in self-defense were black males.
- However, 73.1% of the black males legally killed by a citizen in self-defense between 2009-2012 were killed by a black citizen.
- Heartbreakingly, due to a variety of societal factors, black males are disproportionately involved in violent crime, especially against black citizens.

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- 42.6% of victims of all solved criminal homicides from 2009-2012 were black males
- 89.6% of black males killed in criminal homicides from 2009-2012 were killed by another black male
- 40.6% of the police officers murdered in the line of duty from 2009-2012 were killed by black males*
- *In spite of these statistics, only 32.2% of the deaths from police use of force from 2009-2012 involved black males*

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- These data suggest yearly averages of:
 - **120 black males are killed each year by police use of force**
- Compare this to the following averages:
 - 38 black males are killed each year in negligent accidents
 - 162 black males are killed each year in justifiable homicides by citizens acting in self-defense
 - 4,166 black males are killed each year in criminal homicides (murders & manslaughters)

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- This suggests yearly averages of:
 - **120 black males are killed each year by police use of force**
- Compare this to these additional averages:
 - 2,369 black males are killed each year in the U.S. in motor vehicle accidents*
 - 2,532 black males commit suicide in the U.S. each year**
 - Race statistics are not available on lightning strikes***

* National Safety Council, Itasca, IL, Injury Facts, (2012). <http://www.nsc.org>

** <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide/statistics/aag.html>

*** <http://www.usatoday.com/weather/resources/basics/wlightning.htm>

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- As there are approximately 20,864,500 black males in the U.S., here are annual percentages:
 - 0.020% of all black males died in a criminal homicide last year
 - 0.012% of all black males committed suicide last year
 - 0.011% of all black males died in a vehicle crash last year
 - 0.00078% of all black males died by a private citizen acting in self-defense
 - **0.00078% of all black males died from police use of force last year**

Black males in the U.S. are killed just as frequently by (mostly black) private citizens acting in self-defense as they are killed by police use of force.

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- *Research Question 3: How many deaths of black men occur annually from police use of force?*
- Answer: Approximately 120 per year, or 1 out of every 173,871 black males in the U.S.
- Answer: Approximately equal to only a third of Americans struck by lightning each year, which is 373.

Police-Related Killings and Black Males

- *Research Question 4: How does the frequency of black male deaths from police use of force compare to other forms of homicide, suicide, and other unusual events?*
- Answer: While black males are disproportionately involved in violent crime, the vast majority of people killed by police use of force (67.8%) are not black males.
- Answer: Black males are 35 times more likely to be killed in a criminal homicide, 20 times more likely to die in a vehicle crash, 21 times more likely to commit suicide, and equally likely to be killed in self-defense by a black citizen as they are to be killed by the police.

Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- *Research Question 5:* How often should the police legitimately be using lethal force?
- In other words, based on the limits of the law, how frequently should we expect police use of lethal force to legally occur?

Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- In *Tennessee v. Garner* (1985) and other cases, the U.S. Supreme Court specified that the police officers may use lethal force when reasonable and necessary to prevent imminent serious bodily injury.
- The legal definition of serious bodily injury is:
“Injury that involves substantial risk of death, unconsciousness, extreme physical pain, protracted and obvious disfigurement, or protracted loss or impairment of the function of a bodily member, organ, or mental faculty.”*

Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- According to national statistics gathered by the FBI, from 2009-2012 a total of 58,207 police officers sustained injuries from assaults and another 224 police officers were murdered in the line of duty.*
- This is greater than the seating capacity of a typical college football stadium.



Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- *These figures suggest an annual average of 14,552 officers injured, and 56 officers killed each year in assaults while on duty.*

Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- Not all of the injuries sustained by police officers in these assaults may meet the legal definition of serious bodily injury, but many of them do.
- Furthermore, as lethal force may legally be used when there is simply the *threat of imminent serious bodily injury* without any injury actually resulting (such as pointing a loaded gun at a police officer), the figures on officers injured and killed are a very conservative estimate of circumstances permitting the legitimate use of lethal force.

Legitimate Police Use of Lethal Force

- So, while it can be estimated that police officers sustain bodily injuries or death from assaults in approximately 14,600 incidents a year, in response only an average of 372 persons die each year as a result of police use of force.
- This would suggest significant restraint on the part of police officers nationwide with regard to the use of deadly force, not an epidemic of police-initiated killings in the U.S.

Questions the Police and the Community Should Address Together

Questions to Address Together

- Where does the false perception of widespread police killings of citizens originate?
- What can the police and community members do to reduce hostility and misunderstandings between the police and community members?
- What can the police and community members do together to reduce the heartbreaking reality of the high suicide and violent crime rates among African-American males in impoverished urban areas?

Questions to Address Together

- What can the police and the community do together to reduce violent crime, especially violent crime against members of the African-American community?
- What can the police and community do to maintain open communication about police uses of force?

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