

Call for police killings, police deaths to be reported as public health data

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Although no reliable official data currently exist on the number of law enforcement-related deaths each year in the U.S., counting these deaths can and should be done because the data constitute crucial public health information that could help prevent future deaths, according to a new study from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

The authors propose that all law enforcement-related deaths—including people killed by [police](#) as well as police killed in the line of duty—be treated not just as criminal data but as a "notifiable condition," and that they be reported to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) by [public health](#) and medical professionals and published on a weekly basis, as are a host of other conditions ranging from poisonings to pertussis to polio.

"It is time to bring a public health perspective to this longstanding and terrible problem, from a standpoint that emphasizes prevention and health equity, as opposed to treating these data as if they solely belong to the police and are a matter of criminal justice only," said Nancy Krieger, professor of social epidemiology and lead author of the study.

The paper will appear online December 8, 2015 in *PLOS Medicine*.

To support their case—and to highlight the excessive level of police brutality faced by African Americans—the authors present novel data showing that, over the past 50 years, blacks have faced significantly greater risk than whites of being killed by police. In 1965, among black and white men ages 15-34 across the U.S., blacks were eight times more

likely to be killed by police than whites; by 2005, blacks' excess risk had declined, but was still three times higher than that of whites, on par with current estimates.

The researchers also found variations in risk across U.S. cities over time. New York and Cleveland have been particularly risky cities for blacks; in both cities, between 1960 and 2011, depending on the year, blacks' risk of being killed by police ranged anywhere from 5 to 19 times higher than that of whites.

The lack of data on police killings stems, in part, from resistance on the part of police departments to making these data public, the authors write. But public health agencies—which already regularly gather information on dozens of notifiable conditions and submit it to the CDC for inclusion in weekly updates—should also gather data on law-enforcement-related deaths in order to understand and prevent them. These data involve mortality and affect the well-being of the families and communities of those who are killed.

The authors note that The Guardian newspaper in the United Kingdom—through a website launched in June 2015 called "The Counted"—has already been reporting, in real time, the number of people in the U.S. killed by police, using information from news outlets, research groups, reporting, and submissions from users. According to "The Counted," more than 500 people in the U.S. were killed by police between January 1, 2015 and June 9, 2015—twice what would be expected based on estimates from the FBI; the toll reached 1000 on November 16, 2015. "It is stunning that we in the United States must turn to a UK newspaper website for timely and detailed reporting on deaths due to police violence," the authors write.

More information: "Police killings and police deaths are public health data and can be counted," Nancy Krieger, Jarvis T. Chen, Pamela D.

Waterman, Mathew V. Kiang, and Justin Feldman, *PLOS Medicine*, December 8, 2015, [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pmed.1001915](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1001915)

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