

Black males nearly three times as likely to die when police use force, study finds

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A new Drexel University study found that black males are nearly three times as likely to be killed by police action as white males, while Hispanic males are more than one-and-a-half times as likely to fall victim.

James Buehler, MD, a clinical professor in Drexel's Dornsife School of Public Health, conducted his study, which took a population-level perspective, in response to widespread interpretations of a study released in the summer by Roland G. Fryer. Many interpreted Fryer's study, which looked at situations in which lethal force might be used, as finding that there was no racial difference in "legal intervention deaths" as a result of [police](#) encounters.

"I undertook this brief investigation into 'legal intervention deaths'—that is, deaths that resulted from the actions of [law enforcement](#) officers—because I felt that the investigation by Fryer, even though it represented an in-depth assessment of police encounters, was interpreted in a way that left out an important part of the whole picture," Buehler explained.

For his study, which was published in the *American Journal of Public Health*, Buehler used national death records from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)'s Wide-Ranging Online Data for Epidemiology Research (WONDER) database from 2010-2014. What he found was that, of the 2,285 deaths attributed to law enforcement action over that five-year period (1.5 deaths per million in U.S.

population per year), 96 percent occurred among males 10 years or older.

Within that cohort of legal intervention deaths, the racial disparity was striking:

- Black: 6.8 deaths per million in population
- Hispanic: 4.1 per million
- White: 2.5 per million
- Asian or Pacific islander: 1.5 per million
- American Indian or Alaska natives: 6.9 per million

As such, [black males](#) are 2.8 times as likely to die due to law enforcement action as white males, with Hispanic males 1.7 times as likely. Rates for Asian and Pacific Islander males were lower than rates for white males.

Although American Indians and Alaska Natives accounted for just about 2 percent of legal intervention deaths per year, their death rate was comparable to the rate seen among African-Americans.

Buehler's results differ from Fryer's because his reflect the whole sequence of events that might result in a legal intervention death: Starting with whether a person is stopped or arrested by police and going through whether police are likely to use lethal force and whether a person survives it.

Fryer's study, instead, had been focused specifically on whether lethal force was used during situations where it might be needed. This would include situations like an aggravated assault, where police might use lethal force to end a situation, but would also leave out routine traffic stops.

"The population-level approach provides another perspective by taking as a starting point, not the outcome of encounters with police, but instead a description of all legal intervention deaths in a population," Buehler said.

While Fryer's study may have alleviated concerns for some, Buehler hopes that his and other population-level studies call attention to the disparities in legal intervention deaths.

"As a [public health](#) person, any large disparity in health is a concern to me," Buehler said. "Awareness of these differences should encourage ongoing attention to finding solutions to this problem."

More information: James W. Buehler, Racial/Ethnic Disparities in the Use of Lethal Force by US Police, 2010–2014, *American Journal of Public Health* (2016). [DOI: 10.2105/AJPH.2016.303575](https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303575)

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