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Violence in Policing

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In this note we examine violence in policing. Our primary effort is to understand the scale and nature of the problem. We define violence in policing as two fold: police killings of civilians and on duty deaths of policeman at the hands of civilians.

Underlying Sources of Controversy

There are more than 20,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States. This circumstance creates challenges in uniformity and coverage in data collection. Some data is collected only as part of the decennial census and thus suffers from issues of timelines. Different analysts will compute different ratios depending on their selection and adjustment of primary data. As police killings are controversial there may also be bias in reporting. Killings of and by the police are also rare – aggregate figures can fail to capture the full story. For all these reasons, this is an area where statistics can paint a basic picture but the user should be aware that there are legitimate differences of opinion about many details.

Data Sources

For raw data on 2019 deaths due to law enforcement we have relied on a database of press accounts provided by killedbythepolice.org. It records 1003 deaths, versus 770 estimated from the best official figures. By implication, the under count in official data is about 25%. Nonblack refers to Asian, Hispanic and White. Data on Asian and Hispanic is less complete due to lower populations but appears to follow the White pattern rather than the Black pattern. Where race is not recorded in the data, we have allocated such deaths proportionate to deaths where race is recorded. Thus, missing race data should not result in systematic under counts of Black deaths. We rely on the FBI for records of police killed on duty and violent death statistics. The Bureau of Justice Statistics provides data on the size of police forces and numbers of arrests. We use Census Bureau data for population sizes and racial composition. The Center for Disease Control provides data on police killings based on the combination of police and medical examiner reports. This data is on a sample rather than full population basis. We summarize our findings by major points.

Police killings of civilians are highly emotive but not an important cause of violent death

Each year approximately 9,000 Americans are murdered and an additional 1,000 are killed by the police. For additional perspective, we note that in a typical year driving while intoxicated results in 10,500 deaths and suicide results in 47,000 deaths. The causes of violent death are in decreasing order suicide (70%), intoxicated driving (16%), criminal activity (13%) and law enforcement (1%.) However, the mission of the police is to protect the citizenry and when their actions instead harm the citizenry the matter will natural be felt more keenly than when the harm derives from other sources.

Blacks appear to be killed in disproportionate numbers but that depends on how you view the figures

A black person's risk of being killed by the police is about 2.3x that of a nonblack person if we normalize by population. But if we normalize instead by arrests, black and nonblack persons have a virtually equal risk of being killed. The equality of deaths per arrest between black and nonblack populations was first reported in an analysis of CDC data for 2009-2012 (Deaths Due to Use of Lethal Force By Law Enforcement; American Journal of Preventive Medicine November 2016; Sarah DeGue, Katherine Fowler, Cynthia Calkins) and was confirmed in our own analysis of the 2019 death data.

Civilians do not kill many policemen

In a typical year 90 policemen will be killed on the job – approximately half die in accidents and half are killed by the citizenry. About 70% of these killings are committed with a handgun. Over a 25

year career about 1 in 650 policemen will be killed on the job. The rate of on the job death for policemen is comparable to other careers involving work outside, for instance telephone linemen, road crews, and arborists. This, however, is an aggregate figure. Certain assignments within police forces are more hazardous than the average.

Nevertheless fear of armed civilians is the dominant force behind most police killings

In about 90% of killings carried out by the police the police state they believed the deceased to be armed. In the vast majority of cases this belief turns out to be correct. Fully 83% of the deceased actually prove to have been armed. In only 8% of the cases were the police wrong in their belief.

Data from the Southern states highlights police self protection rather than racial feeling as the dominant force in police killings

If interracial hostility were an important factor in police killings, one would expect to find black people being killed more often in Southern states given the long history of troubled race relations in those communities. Here we use the term Southern states to indicate one time members of the Confederacy. However, the pattern of police killings in these states goes against the pattern suggested by the assumption of racial hostility. Instead it suggests that most police killings arise from self-protective motives on the part of the police. The Southern states of the United States are in aggregate more violent than the rest of the country. The murder rate is 1.4x higher and the on the job death rate of police is 2.6x higher. Police killing of citizens is also higher at 2.1x, but proportionally fewer black persons are killed by the police so the rate for just black people is only 1.5x higher. A possible explanation of this finding is that southern Blacks are less likely to be armed than Nonblack Southerners. The police appear to have less apprehension of Black Southerners than Nonblack Southerners and so they are less likely to kill Blacks than to kill Nonblacks.

TV is a poor guide to police killings

A shoot out between the police and hardened criminals is a staple of mid-evening entertainment. Actually professional criminals are well aware that gunfights with the police do not end to their advantage and they seek to avoid such confrontations. About half of police killings involve interactions with disturbed individuals – the mentally ill, those emotionally distressed by domestic disputes and the highly depressed seeking to provoke a police killing (“suicide by cop.”) Approximately 6% of those killed by the police are bystanders caught in the cross-fire. Persons killed in custody (e. g. the George Floyd case) are also about 5%. The usual custody death is a high level of force, but possibly still lawful force, applied to someone weakened by underlying medical conditions.

Problem killings do exist

After subtracting killings in which the police reasonably believed the decedent to be a threat and unintended deaths of bystanders, one is left with about 5% to 10% of police killings which are problematic. By numbers these amount to 50-100 per year. Some portion of these involve inadequate training, or serious misjudgement/abuse by officers.

Problem killings are a rare problem

In a given year only about 1 in 700 policemen will kill a citizen. Only one in 7000 will be involved in a problematic killing. Truly abusive killings are not more than 1 in 10,000. A police chief responsible for a 100 man force will probably never see an abusive killing. A police chief responsible for a 1,000 person force will still see only one or two such killings in a career. There is a very high probability that a chief dealing with an abusive killing is facing that situation for the first time. Rather naturally, many chiefs will mishandle the situation. The interjection of other actors

(unions, local and nonlocal politicians) will not help the situation. Since experience with how to handle these situations cannot be expected to reside in local forces, a reasonable procedure would be to refer all problematic killings to a specialized unit of the state police for investigation and processing. Doing so should increase professionalism and detoxify local situations.

Better data is needed

Currently police killings of black persons are the source of considerable political tension. This tension is harmful to police forces and to their mission. In our short review of this matter we have found the available data to suffer from a number of limitations. With factual clarity imperfectly present, the door is opened to opinion, controversy and bad policy making. Collecting high quality data in this area should dispel some of the counterproductive tensions and support better policy making. Ultimately everyone would benefit from this.