



Police Killings and Police Deaths Should Be Treated as Public Health Issues, Researchers Say

With a lack of reliable data on the number of people killed in the United States by police officers, a group of researchers calls for public health agencies to track these deaths.

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A number of different agencies track the number of police officers killed on the job in the United States, but the exact number of people killed by police officers is unknown. Public health experts want that to change.

After months of public outrage about officer-involved shootings of civilians, the FBI announced on Tuesday that it would introduce an entirely new system for reporting fatal police shootings in order to better track the numbers and circumstances of such deaths. The bureau already tracks the number of officers killed in the line of duty from college police to city cops to federal law enforcement officers.

But a group of researchers is pushing for an even more comprehensive accounting of all law-enforcement-related deaths by making them a “notifiable condition” similar to diseases like measles or hepatitis. This would enable public health agencies to report these deaths as they occur.

In an [editorial published online](#) Tuesday in the journal PLoS Medicine, researchers say that a public-health approach would help address the dual problem of civilian injuries and deaths at the hand of police, and of police killed on the job in the United States.

“Vital statistics are the bedrock of public health monitoring. They allow societies to understand what the patterns of mortality are and how they are changing,” editorial author Nancy Krieger, PhD, a professor of social epidemiology at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, told Healthline

Police-related deaths “affect the well-being of the families and communities of the deceased,” which makes it a public health issue, the researchers said.

No Reliable Data

“It is disgraceful that we have not had an accurate count of persons shot and killed by the police each year,” Tim Lynch, director of the Cato Institute’s Project on Criminal Justice, who was not part of the research group, told Healthline.

Multiple sources offer partial information on deaths caused by police, although none of it is comprehensive or available in real time.

One of the best estimates of people killed by cops comes not from the government or police departments, but from The Counted, a digital project operated by the British newspaper The Guardian.

According to the site’s estimates, 1,058 people have been killed in the United States by police so far this year.

The number of those deaths per million is twice as high for African Americans as it is for whites.

“It is unacceptable that the Washington Post and the Guardian newspaper from the UK are becoming the lead source of information about violent encounters between [US] police and civilians. That is not good for anybody,” James Comey, the FBI director, said at a meeting on violent crime in October.

The Counted’s statistics include deaths by gunshot, Taser, being struck by a police vehicle, suspicious deaths in custody, and other causes.

The site gathers this information from a variety of sources, including news reports, research groups, reporting projects, and tips from the public.

Public Health Tracking

A project that would track this data at the federal level was announced by Attorney General Loretta E. Lynch in October, but its fate may depend on who wins the 2016 presidential election. Tracking police-related deaths through the public health system, though, taps into procedures that already exist to monitor and report health conditions.

“Hospitals and medical examiners are uniquely positioned to provide this information to the public in a timely manner,” said Tim Lynch, “and it may be the best way in which to get accurate information on this subject.”

“Public health is concerned with myriad determinants of population health and health inequities, including determinants that are not solely with the public health system,” Krieger said.

Krieger points to a shift among public health agencies toward addressing problems that were once considered outside the realm of public health.

These are often areas where imbalances among different groups exist, such as “poor housing, food policy, low wages, and inadequate transportation systems,” she said.

Resistance to Official Counts

The researchers write that the lack of information on police-related deaths is due “in part because of long-standing and well-documented resistance of police departments to making these data public.”

Public health tracking of police-related deaths, though, would be separate from any investigations that might result. The idea is not to editorialize, but simply to keep an official tally. As is the case in other notifiable conditions that are tracked, only the number of cases is available publicly, although The Counted website includes much more detailed information about victims, including name and photograph.

“To be fair to the police, it just needs to be made plain that the tally does not mean wrongful action by the police,” said Tim Lynch. “When investigations are complete, we will learn whether the incident was justifiable, accidental, or perhaps criminal.”

Although the details of any public health reporting of police-related deaths have yet to be worked out, Krieger sees the proposal as a supplement to other initiatives.

“Ideally, the public health accounting I am proposing would complement, as a source of verification, a website such as The Guardian’s The Counted,” she said.