

# the guardian

## Young black men again faced highest rate of US police killings in 2016

**The Counted project points to continuing racial disparities, with black males aged 15-34 nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed**

Jon Swaine and Ciara McCarthy

January 8, 2017

Young black men were again killed by police at a sharply higher rate than other Americans in 2016, intensifying concerns over the expected abandonment of criminal justice reform by Donald Trump's incoming administration.

Black males aged 15-34 were nine times more likely than other Americans to be killed by law enforcement officers last year, according to data collected for [The Counted](#), an effort by the Guardian to record every such death. They were also killed at four times the rate of young white men.

Racial disparities persisted in 2016 even as the total number of deaths caused by police fell slightly. In all, 1,091 deaths were recorded for 2016, compared with 1,146 logged in 2015. Several 2015 deaths only came to light last year, suggesting the 2016 number may yet rise.

The total is again more than twice [the FBI's annual number of "justifiable homicides"](#) by police, counted in recent years under a voluntary system allowing police to opt out of submitting details of fatal incidents. Plans to improve the government records have been thrown into doubt by the election of Trump, who campaigned as a "law and order" conservative.

"This data is so important," said Chuck Wexler, the executive director of the Police Executive Research Forum. "We have to capture the whole range of use of force by police, and we have to have a way to identify how we are doing."

Citing the Guardian findings, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) expressed renewed concern over Trump's [nomination of Jeff Sessions](#) for US attorney general. Sessions, a rightwing Republican senator for Alabama, has been hostile to critics of police, such as the Black Lives Matter movement.

The ACLU urged members of the Senate judiciary committee to press Sessions at his confirmation hearings in Washington next week on whether he thinks too many Americans are being killed by police, and whether police departments across the country are prioritizing the use of force over de-escalation.

“Committee members should also question Sessions on what role, if any, the Justice Department would play in trying to help police departments nationwide reduce the number of people they kill,” the campaign group said in a report published this week.

The 2016 data showed a decline in the number of unarmed people killed by police, a central concern of protests across the country after the fatal shooting of an unarmed black 18-year-old in Ferguson, Missouri, in August 2014. A total of 169 unarmed people were killed in 2016, compared with 234 in 2015.

There was a marked increase in the number of Native Americans killed by police, although the available sample size was relatively small. A total of 24 Native Americans were killed by police in states across the US, compared with 13 killed in 2015. Eleven of the Native Americans killed in 2016 were young males, meaning that this group was almost six times more likely than Americans at large to be killed by law enforcement.

There was little movement, however, in other demographic data. In 2016, 53% of people killed by police were white, compared with 51% in 2015. Hispanic or Latino people comprised 17% of the total in both years. There was a small decline in the proportion of African Americans among the total, from 27% to 24%.

Geography also continued to correlate with deaths. Alaska, Washington DC, New Mexico and Oklahoma were all among the five states (plus the District of Columbia) with the highest rates of deaths relative to their populations in both 2015 and 2016.

Eight people were killed in Alaska, which had the year’s highest rate, compared with just one fatality caused by officers in Delaware, which had the lowest rate. Delaware’s population is 28% larger than Alaska’s.

Law enforcement officers in New Mexico have killed a total of 43 people over the past two years. Last month, the state attorney general launched a review of how police shootings and use of force incidents are handled in the state. Police in Oklahoma have killed a total of 69 people in two years, compared with 52 in the state of New York, whose population is five times greater.

Franklin Zimring, a professor of law at University of California, Berkeley, and an author of a book about police killings, said the 2016 data indicated that “the patterns you found are patterns that repeat”. Zimring said: “What 2016 tells you is that the three-deaths-per-day finding for 2015 is typical of the period.”

Barack Obama’s administration has taken limited steps to reduce the use of deadly force by law enforcement since Ferguson, including a series of recommendations for police departments made by a policing taskforce. But Democratic efforts to make such reforms more robust via controls on federal funding were repeatedly rejected by the Republican-controlled Congress.

Partly in response to the Guardian’s investigation, the justice department and FBI have promised to publish more comprehensive data on killings by police. In an essay for the Harvard Law Review on Thursday, Obama said improved data collection “has the potential to make the use of force even more rare and the devastating consequences of force even less likely”.

Others remain skeptical that government efforts will be successful. While a separate justice department program to record all “arrest-related deaths” will see officials actively seeking news of killings by police, the FBI intends to merely expand its voluntary system.

“The FBI has been embarrassed by work of investigative journalists that have clearly done a better job gathering this important data,” said Tim Lynch, the director of the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute’s project on criminal justice. “I expect the bureau to show some improvement, but considering its past work on this subject, that’s not saying much.”

The justice department’s new data collection program involved a threat to reduce federal funding for any local police departments that failed to provide data to Washington on deaths caused by their officers. Trump has, however, stated that the funding should come with “no strings”, meaning the program may be rendered toothless.

The Counted found that a plurality of killings by police in 2016 began with attempted traffic or street stops by officers. Almost 29% of deadly incidents last year developed from police trying to pull over a vehicle or approaching someone in public, including some potential suspects for crimes.

Another one in five killings by police last year started with calls reporting domestic violence or some other domestic disturbance. Data analyzed by the justice department shows that domestic calls are the deadliest for police officers.

Police killed 161 people while moving to arrest known suspects or to execute warrants of some kind. They used force fatally in nearly 259 cases shortly after someone had committed a crime – 188 of them violent crimes and 71 nonviolent.

More than 200 people killed by law enforcement in 2016 had fired a gun at or near officers before they were killed in return fire, according to police and witness reports on the incidents. Another 50 were accused of attacking officers without a gun. And 142 allegedly pointed, raised or levelled a gun or a nonlethal gun at police before being killed.

Authorities also alleged that 135 people were killed as they appeared to reach for a potential weapon, waistband or pocket suspiciously, although 18 of these people turned out to be unarmed. One hundred and fifty-four people were accused of refusing to drop a weapon of some kind in the moments before they were killed by officers. And 201 others were said to have been killed after they struggled, fought with or advanced on officers.

At least one in every five people killed by police in 2016 was mentally ill or in the midst of a mental health crisis when they were killed, according to reports following the incident by law enforcement, local media and relatives.

In October, for instance, Deborah Danner, a 66-year-old woman with schizophrenia, was killed by a New York police officer in a shooting the city’s mayor called “tragic and unacceptable”. Police went to Danner’s Bronx apartment after receiving a phone call from a neighbor who said Danner was acting strangely. An officer opened fire when Danner swung a baseball bat near his head.

“What is clear in this one instance: we failed,” NYPD chief James O’Neill later said. In more than 80 killings by police in 2016, the initial contact with law enforcement began following a call reporting that the person was suicidal or harming themselves, or attempting to harm themselves.

Of the at least 35 military veterans killed by police last year, at least 20 had been diagnosed with a mental illness or were having a mental health crisis. In August, Ronald Smith, a Gulf war veteran, sought help via an online crisis chat service for veterans. The chat service alerted deputies in Pickaway County, Ohio, who arrived at Smith’s home and fatally shot the 45-year-old sometime after arriving and finding him armed with a gun.

Police officers were charged with crimes in relation to 18 deaths from 2016, along with several others from the previous year. These charges included the arrests of officers involved in the high-profile killings of Terence Crutcher in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and Philando Castile near St Paul, Minnesota.

Several lesser-known fatal cases have also led to criminal prosecutions, such as that of Deravis “Caine” Rogers, an unarmed black man who was killed in June by an officer in Atlanta, Georgia. Local authorities charged officer James Burns with murder and other crimes. Investigators said Rogers was driving away from a parking lot when Burns opened fire without pausing to see whether Rogers was the suspect he was seeking.

Sessions’ nomination has dismayed activists who only a year ago felt the US was heading toward bipartisan policing reform. Sessions has accused Black Lives Matter of being “really radical” and driving up crime by deterring officers from policing effectively. He has also consistently attacked investigations of local forces by the justice department.

A report published on Friday by New York University’s Brennan Center for Justice warned that Sessions’ aversion to what he has called federal “interference” may lead to a resurgence in abuse.

Police departments “could be emboldened to escalate their use of force, exacerbating the racial tension plaguing cities across the country,” said the report, by Ames Grawert, a counsel and former prosecutor in New York.