

Vox

I was a cop in Australia. We don't shoot the people we're sworn to protect.

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“AMERICAN NIGHTMARE,” read the cover of the Australian newspaper the Daily Telegraph in response to news that an Australian woman, Justine Damond, had been shot and killed by police in Minneapolis.

As a former police officer living in Australia, I was shocked at the news. Twenty-eight years in law enforcement in Queensland has given me some insight into how and when police need to use lethal force. In this case, the shooting just didn't make sense.

This incident has again placed the use of lethal force by police in the United States in the spotlight. Minneapolis Police Chief Janeé Harteau stated what many observers were thinking: “Justine didn't have to die. ... I believe the actions in question go against who we are as a department, how we train and the expectations we have for our officers.”

What made Damond's shooting stand out even more to me was its atypical nature further underlined by the Black Lives Matter movement. Black men are disproportionately affected by police violence in the United States, yet in this case, the victim was a white woman shot by a black police officer. Harteau has now been forced to resign, and the mayor is coming under increasing pressure to address the culture of policing in the city.

In my current job as a criminologist at Bond University in Queensland, I study the effects of policing and gun laws on crime and homicide rates. The Australian police shooting rate is considerably lower than in the US — our country has an average of five deaths per year in police-related incidents.

The US average is around 400 according to the FBI, with estimates that the number is actually much higher, potentially twice as much, due to poor data. When accounting for population differences, that comes down to roughly six times more deaths by police shootings in the US than in Australia. And that's when using the likely lowball estimate on the US side.

What accounts for this difference? I believe the answer comes down to two things: gun culture and laws and the culture of policing in the United States. Justine Damond's death is a needless tragedy. But I can't help but question if it would have occurred if Damond had been in Australia as opposed to the US when she made that police call. It's time to look at what can and should be

done to prevent such shootings — both here in my own country and in America, where the problem is more severe.

My experience with police shootings

During my time as a police officer, I was involved in one shooting of a suspect and the investigation of fatal and non-fatal shootings by police. It occurred during a raid on an officer of an outlaw motorcycle gang — a high-level threat.

Upon entry, the suspect appeared from a doorway appearing to hold a long-arm weapon. We later learned it was an underwater spear gun, a tool used for recreational fishing. Nonetheless, in that split second, one of the police on our team judged the situation to be life-threatening and shot the suspect, wounding him. The shooting was justified by a later investigation as self-defense.

It's a moment I look back on with regret. Still, I realize that in situations like this, instinct takes over for police in threatening situations. It made me realize the importance of adequate, realistic training in dealing with potentially life-threatening situations. As a police officer, your reactions must be second nature and should be based on appropriate training responses.

Australian police follow national guidelines on the use of lethal force that underpin police training methods. This include use of firearms only in the case of self-defense or defense of others against imminent threat, to prevent a serious crime with grave threat to life, and only as a last resort in all of these cases.

But in the United States, lethal force laws vary from state to state and in some areas are more relaxed — an Amnesty International **report** found that some state laws allow lethal force to "suppress opposition to an arrest" or to arrest someone for a "suspected felony."

Standards of training need to be universally enforced

We're not perfect in Australia. We have our own police shooting fatalities. I don't think there's any police officer out there who wants to kill another human being. But compared with the US, our situation is considerably better. To see the differences in American versus Australian policing, it's worth looking at several big factors.

The first is training standards. In Australia, there are **highly centralized large policing services** in each state that all share a common standard of training and protocols. And in Queensland in 2014, when there was a series of fatal police shootings, the commissioner ordered a **review of police training** and concluded "...changes would be made to how police officers were trained to emphasize using minimal force to de-escalate situations."

That's not the case in the United States, where police services are often small municipal departments that lack both resources and a standard of training. Take the police in Ferguson, Missouri, where Michael Brown was shot in 2014: Among its scant 72 personnel, 18 are civilian support staff for a city with a population of nearly 21,000. With limited resources and numbers, small police services don't have the same wide pool of experience and expertise to help train responses to encounters.

In the case of Justine Damond, the former Minneapolis police chief has already identified training and a failure to follow protocols — specifically, the failure to use body cameras — as issues in her death. Just the presence of a body camera can provide a level of awareness that discourages shooting. And even in the event of the shooting despite use of the camera, evidence of what happened can help provide justification or otherwise for the officer's actions — and assist in future prevention tactics.

There's also the fact that the officer fired from inside a car, across his partner. What was the threat that the officer reacted to? They were not responding to an armed offender. They had been tasked to assist a woman possibly being sexually assaulted.

But will this result in any top-down changes?

The influence of American gun culture is a major difference

American gun culture, I believe, affects the approach of police in their interactions with the community. In Australia, police simply do not expect members of the community to be armed threats. In the US, it seems the opposite is true. When my police team shot an unarmed suspect in that raid, it was because we were convinced that he was armed.

Just look at the rate of gun ownership and gun-related homicides. A 2016 US study estimated that **more than a third of households had guns**. In **Australia in 2005**, the rate was just 6 percent, and this had been steadily declining since 1998. While US gun ownership is also declining, the rate of ownership remains high when compared with Australia.

In **Australia the murder rate** has now dropped to an all-time low of 1.8 per 100,000 people in 2013-'14. By comparison, in 2012 the **murder rate in the US** was 4.7 per 100,000.

You could dismiss this as having nothing to do with guns. But the data says otherwise. In Australia, restrictive gun ownership laws were introduced after the **Port Arthur massacre**, in which 35 people were killed and 23 wounded by a lone gunman using automatic weapons. Since that time, the number of firearm-related homicides has decreased—they now make up only 14 percent of homicides in Australia.

While the number of firearm-related homicides has gone up since 2005, they remain at historically low levels. There has been some **debate as to the effect these restrictive laws** have had on the homicide rate, but generally it is accepted that the laws, while not the only factor, have had a strong influence in driving down these homicides.

In the US, **firearm-related homicides** have also gone down since the early '90s. But firearms account for most of the deaths in this country — in 2014, 68 percent of the murders in the US were by gun. So while the number is going down, guns are still the weapon of choice for murder in the US.

This high level of gun ownership within the community creates a threat environment that is simply not present in Australia. When police do a traffic stop in Australia, there is no reliance on firearms as a method to force people to comply. It could be argued that this is not the case in the US, and this in turn leads to the high level of police shootings. It helps explain why although

police deaths and firearm-related homicides are down, police shootings don't seem to be **declining**.

The warrior cop: the move toward militarization of the police

The question as to the use of weaponry is not just limited to criminals. The rise of the “warrior cop” also a concerning trend. Such a culture lends itself to an “us versus them” approach to policing. The blurring of the line between the military and the police, especially in the US, is now on the political agenda.

Walter Olson, of the libertarian American think tank the Cato Institute, **criticized** the rising militarization of law enforcement as illustrated in Ferguson:

Why armored vehicles in a Midwestern inner suburb? Why would cops wear camouflage gear against a terrain patterned by convenience stores and beauty parlors? Why are the authorities in Ferguson, Mo. so given to quasi-martial crowd control methods (such as bans on walking on the street) and, per the reporting of Riverfront Times, the firing of tear gas at people in their own yards?

Olson was not alone in his criticism of the heavy-handed response of law enforcement in Ferguson. Politicians from left to right as well as activist groups such as Black Lives Matter criticized the overuse of police force. Republican Sen. Rand Paul used the Ferguson case to **argue** for a reversal of the current US trend of supplying military hardware for law enforcement purposes.

Author Radley Balko has catalogued **the rise of the warrior cop** and the increasing convergence of military and policing operational doctrines. He illustrates how SWAT teams have proliferated since the mid-1970s in the US: “The country’s first official SWAT team started in the late 1960s in Los Angeles. By 1975, there were approximately 500 such units. Today, there are thousands.”

SWAT teams deployed in **police raids** in the US increased from 3,000 per year in the 1980s to approximately 45,000 by 2007. Firepower has overtaken the role of community engagement. In Australia, specialist teams are only used in high-threat situations. The use of military type weapons is not available for general policing.

The shooting of Justine Damond is indicative of many policing problems, not just in Minneapolis but across the US. There appears to be a level of preparedness to use lethal force in many situations that in Australia would not elevate the police response to that level. Part of that, I believe, comes down to a heavily armed population. Part of it is lack of standardized training. And part of it is a shifting culture in the US police force — one full of SWAT teams and camo.

Damond’s family is entitled to answers to the numerous questions that surround her death. They are also entitled to justice if there is wrongdoing on behalf of the police response. That alone will cause society to reflect on how improvements could be made to our law enforcement responses. Australian police aren’t perfect.

But Justine Damond’s presence in the US put her in heightened danger for no reason. We’ve all got to do better.

