



Al Qaeda Threat is Nothing Compared to the Danger Police Poses to Americans

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It got a lot of attention this morning when I [tweeted](#), “You’re Eight Times More Likely to be Killed by a Police Officer than a Terrorist.” It’s been quickly retweeted dozens of times, indicating that the idea is interesting to many people. So let’s discuss it in more than 140 characters.

In case it needs saying, police officers are unlike terrorists in almost all respects. Crucially, the goal of the former, is to have a stable, peaceful, safe, law-abiding society, which is a goal we all share. The goal of the latter is ... well, it’s complicated. I’ve cited my favorite expert on that, Audrey Kurth Cronin, [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#). Needless to say, the goal of terrorists is not that peaceful, safe, stable society.

I picked up the statistic from a blog post called: “[Fear of Terror Makes People Stupid](#),” which in turn cites the National Safety Council for this and lots of other numbers reflecting likelihoods of dying from various causes. So dispute the number(s) with them, if you care to.

I take it as a given that your mileage may vary. If you dwell in the suburbs or a rural area, and especially if you’re wealthy, white, and well-spoken, your likelihood of death from these two sources probably converges somewhat (at very close to zero).

The point of the quote is to focus people on sources of mortality society-wide, because this focus can guide public policy efforts at reducing death. (Thus, the number is not a product of the base rate fallacy.) Too many people are still transfixed by terrorism despite the collapse of Al Qaeda over the last decade and the quite manageable—indeed, the quite well-managed—danger that terrorism presents our society today.

If you want to indulge your fears and prioritize terrorism, [you’ll have plenty of help](#), and neither this blog post nor any other appeal to reason or statistics is likely to convince you.

Among the John Mueller articles I would recommend, though, is [“Witches, Communists, and Terrorists: Evaluating the Risks and Tallying the Costs”](#) (with Mark Stewart).

If one wants to be clinical about what things reduce death to Americans, one should ask why police officers are such a significant source of danger. I have some ideas.

Cato’s work on the [War on Drugs](#) shows how it produces danger to the public and law enforcement both, not to mention loss of privacy and civil liberties, disrespect for law enforcement, disregard of the rule of law, and so on. Is the sum total of mortality and morbidity reduced or increased by the War on Drugs? I don’t know what to say. But the War on Drugs certainly increases the danger to innocent people (including law enforcement personnel), where drug legalization would allow harm to naturally concentrate on the people who choose unwisely to use drugs.

The [militarization of law enforcement](#) probably contributes to the danger. Cato’s [Botched Paramilitary Police Raids map](#) illustrates the problem of over-aggressive policing. Cato alum [Radley Balko](#) now documents these issues at the *Huffington Post*. Try out his [“Cop or Soldier?”](#) quiz.

There are some bad apples in the police officer barrel. Given the power that law enforcement personnel have—up to and including the power to kill—I’m not satisfied that standards of professionalism are up to snuff. You can follow the Cato Institute’s [National Police Misconduct Reporting Project](#) on Twitter at [@NPMRP](#).

If the provocative statistic cited above got your attention, that’s good. If it adds a little more to your efforts at producing a safe, stable, peaceful, and free society, all the better.

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