

Detroit leads US in police killings

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Detroit police officers kill citizens at a higher rate than police in any other big US city, according to FBI statistics made public by the *Detroit Free Press* Monday, May 15. Detroit had a rate of 0.92 fatal shootings per 100,000 residents, far higher than New York and Los Angeles, two cities recently scandalized by revelations of widespread police killings and brutality.

Detroit, with nearly 1 million residents, averaged nearly 10 fatal police shootings each year between 1990 and 1998. By comparison, New York, with 7.3 million residents, averaged 28 fatal shootings a year during the same period—a rate of 0.39.

Over the past few days, the *Detroit Free Press* and the *Detroit News* have published exposés about the police shootings and subsequent cover-ups by internal police investigators, the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office and the Michigan State Police. The articles have detailed several cases in which police officers killed or severely wounded senior citizens, teenagers and mentally ill persons, and then were exonerated after claiming they had fired in self-defense.

According to the *News*, of the 40 fatal shootings by police in Detroit in the past five years, 35 officers were cleared of any wrongdoing, while four were charged with misdemeanors. Only one police officer was convicted and sentenced to jail. Meanwhile, the city has paid a total of \$8.6 million since 1995 to settle six lawsuits in which the police department cleared officers who shot citizens.

Former police executives and attorneys acknowledged that officers feel they can murder and terrorize city residents with impunity because they will not be held accountable. Police investigators focus on justifying the shootings, rather than determining what happened, they say, and the investigators routinely assist officers in concocting stories to protect themselves. Investigators also regularly fail to interview eyewitnesses and gather evidence against the police, they said.

“The failure of the Detroit Police Department to discipline its officers is intentional and deliberately indifferent to the rights of the citizens,” retired Police

Commander Clinton Donaldson, who ran the internal controls division from 1986 to 1994, stated in a recent lawsuit brought by an unarmed man who was shot by police.

In eight cases, officers said they fired because people came at them with weapons, but autopsies found the victims were shot in the back. One such case in November 1997 involved Hong Leong, a 40-year-old factory worker with a history of mental illness. Police officers John Borgens and James Pratt chased Leong's car into a dead-end street after he screeched his tires while rounding a corner. The police said Leong, apparently drunk, climbed out his car with a 12-gauge shotgun, fired into the air and yelled, “Go ahead and shoot me!”

Police said they shot Leong when he turned on them with the gun. He died of 12 to 16 shots to the back and the palm of one hand. Although police evidence technicians found the shotgun had never been fired outside of Leong's truck, both homicide detectives and the Wayne County Prosecutor's office said the officers shot in self-defense.

“I think they executed him and the department covered it up,” said David A. Robinson, an attorney representing police victims, who worked 13 years as a Detroit police officer. “An officer can literally get away with murder so long as he recites the magical incantation of ‘fearing for my life,’ or hides behind the magical talisman of the ‘dark, shiny object,’” Robinson said.

In some cases individual police officers have more than one fatal shooting to their “credit.” Officer Eugene Brown, of the department's Tactical Services Section, has killed three people and wounded six others in the six years he has been on the police force. In each case, the department and prosecutors ruled Brown acted appropriately.

Before being hired as a Detroit police officer Brown was unable to obtain law enforcement jobs elsewhere, including the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, but he served as a security guard for Mayor Dennis Archer and City Council members for several months.

On February 8, 1995, Brown killed 30-year-old

Roderick Carrington with three gunshots fired within 15 seconds. Though Brown said Carrington was charging him with a knife, the officer's partner saw the entire incident but did not fire.

On September 21, 1996 Brown fatally shot 20-year-old LaMar Grable with three shots in the chest, all fired from close range, and two bullets in the back. That night Brown and his partner, Officer Vicky Yost, were riding outside their precinct when they said they saw Grable walking in the rain, carrying a gun. The police said Grable, who did not have a criminal record, ran away when challenged and Brown opened fire.

The only fingerprints on the gun police said Grable was carrying belonged to Yost. "The police claimed our client had a gun, but never did check into the serial numbers of the gun to see where it can from," attorney Sheldon Miller said. Yost failed to show up for three scheduled depositions in the case and then refused to testify, pleading her Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination.

Although Brown was cleared of any wrongdoing, a court-appointed mediation panel recommended the city pay \$750,000 to the family of LaMar Grable. But the young man's family has rejected the offer, and a lawsuit is scheduled for trial later this month.

City officials have repeatedly defended the actions of the police. Detroit Police Chief Benny Napoleon and Wayne County Prosecutor John O'Hair said the figures comparing Detroit police shootings to other cities did not take into account how violent the city's criminals were. "There is a very violent element in our city," O'Hair said in an interview with the *Free Press* earlier this month. "It is high-risk, and this is the element the police deal with."

Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer insisted that police officers were not trigger-happy, saying, "I have never met a police officer who fired a weapon who has felt good about it." He defended the internal police investigators and Prosecutor O'Hair, saying, "the manner in which the cases have been handled thus far are consistent with good police practices." Then in a gesture to "avoid even the appearance of conflict or impropriety," the mayor announced that the department's Internal Control Bureau would conduct future investigations rather than Homicide detectives, adding that there was no need to reopen old cases.

The Detroit news media has long been aware of the prevalence of police brutality and official cover ups, but has generally said little about it. The recent revelations are a sign of growing concern that the police and prosecutor's

office are being discredited and that the killings are undercutting the 25-year effort by city authorities to refurbish the image of the police department.

In the 1960s and 1970s the Detroit Police Department was notorious for its violence, particularly against minority youth. One police unit, dubbed STRESS—Stop the Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets—carried out the execution-style killings of a more than a dozen black men in the space of a few years.

Coleman Young, the city's first black mayor, was elected in 1973 by pledging to disband STRESS and integrate the police force. Young and other Democratic officials oversaw the appointment of black police chiefs and the hiring of thousands of minority officers. But as social inequality grew in the 1970s and 1980s—particularly as the mass layoffs and plant shutdowns in the auto industry turned Detroit into the poorest big city in America—Young strengthened the powers of the police and embraced the politics of law and order.

Young's successor Dennis Archer has continued this course. As the *Free Press* noted, "Race was a crucial factor in police shootings in the 1960s and 70s, with black residents being shot by white officers. But blue is the color that matters. Fatal shootings these days do not fall in apparent racial patterns. The officers are black and white, and the civilians are white, black and Asian alike."

Archer, a close political ally of the Clinton administration, presides over a city that is even more socially polarized than in Coleman Young's time. While the Detroit-area auto companies record tens of billions in profits, many of the city's working class areas are virtually uninhabitable after years of chronic poverty, unemployment and budget cutting. High-stakes gamblers bet more on a single roll of the dice at the newly built casinos than many residents of the city's blighted neighborhoods earn in an entire year. These are the conditions that have led the city's business and political establishment to rely even more on the brute force of the police.



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