

Texas recorded almost 7,000 deaths in custody since 2005

Shannon Jones
30 July 2016

According to statistics made available by the University of Texas at Austin, nearly 7,000 people have died in police custody or in prison in Texas since 2005. The information is contained in an online database published by the school's Institute for Urban Policy Research and Analysis (IUPRA).

The Texas Justice Initiative was created by Amanda Woog, a postdoctoral fellow in IUPRA. The data set spans 11 years and contains interactive features, including the names, ages, demographics, time and cause of death.

The release of the data comes amid a relentless campaign by the media to delegitimize protests against police violence in the wake of the shootings of police officers in Dallas and Baton Rouge. However, it further substantiates the case that the systematic and endemic brutality on the part of the police against the US population is on the rise.

According to the latest figures available, police have killed 551 in the US so far this year. Virtually no one has been held accountable for this toll. This includes officers in Baltimore involved in the death of Freddie Grey, who have now been cleared by the prosecutor's office.

According to the University of Texas study, 6,913 people died in custody in the state between 2005 and 2015, an average of 628 per year. Of those deaths, 1,900 were individuals who had never been charged with a crime. Sixty-eight percent of deaths occurred in prisons.

Significantly, 1,118 people died in police custody before booking. Of those, 562 deaths were classified as justifiable homicides, a catch-all category that includes victims of police violence. Another 16 percent were classified as suicides and 7 percent as accidental injury. Ninety percent of these victims had not been charged

with any crime. And deaths in police custody are rising. The year 2015 saw the most deaths in custody, with 683 fatalities.

Justifiable homicide was the leading cause of nonnatural death for African-American and Latino men, accounting for 30 and 34 percent of nonnatural deaths respectively. Suicide was the leading cause of nonnatural death for white males, accounting for 411 deaths since 2005. According to the database, 41 percent of those who died in jails had been in custody for seven or fewer days.

Altogether 772 people, 11 percent of the total, died from suicide; 275 (4 percent) died from alcohol or drug intoxication and 255 (4 percent) from other reasons.

While whites made up 31 percent of the Texas prison population they accounted for 42 percent of prison deaths. Ninety percent died of "natural causes," but the median age of those who died was far lower than the 72-year life expectancy of the average Texan.

The huge fatality rate points to the extreme brutality of the criminal justice system in the United States, where those accused of crimes, mostly poor and working class, are treated with cruelty and indifference. Texas in particular is known for its harsh treatment of prisoners.

The state carries out more executions than any other US state. According to the Death Penalty Information Center, Texas has carried out 537 executions since 1976 with a current death row population of 263. Between 2005 and 2015, the time of the study, the state executed 195 people.

According to the Sentencing Project, Texas has a prison population of 158,000, with a prison incarceration rate of 584 per 100,000 people. Another 66,000 are held in jails.

Jennifer Laurin, a law professor at the University of

Texas at Austin spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* Friday about the Texas Justice Initiative. “I am proud of the work that has gone into this project and that the University of Texas can lay claim to this important initiative,” she said.

“I think it is an extremely significant project that contributes to the understanding about police use of force and deaths in custody.

“The state of Texas required after the last legislative session that reports be submitted on deaths in custody to the attorney general’s office. It is unusual for police departments to make that data available. The contribution of the Texas Justice Initiative was to make that data usable. What this does is render it comprehensible to researchers and the public who want to know what police departments are doing.”

By way of contrast she pointed to the Obama administration’s open data initiative. “It is useless,” she said. “It is not in an intelligible format.”

She said that, from her experience, obstacles to the prosecution of law enforcement personnel relating to deaths in custody were difficult for plaintiffs or prosecutors to overcome. “The existence of more data can create leverage,” she added, “especially if you can see a consistent uptick over time.”

In a recent highly publicized case, Sandra Bland, a vocal opponent of police violence, died in an East Texas jail in July 2015 under mysterious circumstances. According to the official version of events, she used a trash bag to hang herself in her jail cell. A few days earlier police had arrested her in a brutal manner, without cause, following a traffic stop. Her death was included in the total of 1,111 who died in jail during the time covered by the study and is listed as “suicide.”

Bland’s family, however, rejected the possibility that she committed suicide. Whatever happened in that Texas jail cell, the police are ultimately responsible. The harsh treatment meted out to Bland is not atypical.

According to a report, in the 17 days following Bland’s death another four black women died in police custody in states across the US. Most had been in jail for two days maximum, held on minor charges like shoplifting.

Researchers compiled the data used in the IUPRA study from figures reported to the Texas attorney general’s office. The only other state where similar

data has been compiled appears to be California. According to those figures 684 died annually in police custody between 2005 and 2014, about the same annual number as Texas, although the population of California is 50 percent larger (38 million) than the population of Texas (26 million). Of the 6,837 deaths in custody in California, 984, 14 percent, were at the hands of law enforcement officers.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact