

Justice Department report estimates nearly 2,000 “arrest-related deaths” annually in US

Our reporter
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A new report released by the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that 1,900 “arrest-related deaths” occurred in the United States between June 2015 and May 2016. The number of police killings, or homicides, recorded by the BJS is more than twice the number reported by the FBI.

The BJS, a division of the US Justice Department, defines “arrest-related deaths” as all deaths “that occur during the process of arrest or during an attempt to obtain custody” by state or local police agencies. This would include, for example, people who die of a heart attack or commit suicide while being arrested, but would not include individuals shot by police officers who are not on active duty.

Despite the enormous number of people killed by police every year, there is no reliable or standardized method for calculating the figure. The FBI’s annual report is based on voluntary reports from local police agencies, many of which do not submit figures. Web sites like *Killed By Police* and the *Guardian’s* The Counted rely on media reports, but not all deaths are reported in news stories.

The BJS report is based on a combination of media reports and a more systematic survey of police agencies. Based on media accounts, it identified 1,348 potential arrest-related deaths between June 2015 and March 2016, or an average of about 135 per month. It requested reports from local police to confirm or deny media tallies and identify other deaths, which resulted in a 12 percent increase in deaths for this period.

The 1,900 estimate is based on the full media survey from June 2015 to May 2016, plus an additional 12 percent extrapolated from the three-month survey of police agencies.

The BJS estimated that 64 percent of the deaths were homicides (that is, willful killings), while 18 percent

were suicides and 11 percent were “accidents.” This would mean that about 1,216 fall under the category of police killings.

In comparison, the *Guardian* has recorded 1,026 individuals killed by police so far this year and 1,146 total last year.

The vast majority of police killings are never covered by the national media, and are buried in three- or four-paragraph summaries in local media, if reported at all. The individuals killed are from all racial backgrounds and ages, though overwhelmingly they are poor or working class. Some of the deaths are related to the commission of violent crimes, but most are a product of desperate social conditions and a brutal and disproportionate police response.

Among the recent killings this past week are:

* An unidentified 44-year-old man in Everett, Washington who was fatally shot Saturday night after police claim he reached for an officer’s gun during a struggle that followed a domestic violence incident.

* Jeffery Lee Lawson, 48, who was shot and killed Saturday night in Shelby County, Tennessee after police claim he threatened them with a knife while in his driveway. His wife had previously reported that Lawson was bipolar but did not always take his medication.

* Marlon Lewis, 37, died of cardiac arrest on Thursday after police in Badin, North Carolina used a Taser on him repeatedly. Police claim that Lewis, a father of two, was resisting arrest, but his sister said that he had called 911 for help and told police that someone was trying to kill him.

* Steven Garrett Ward, 20, was shot in Jefferson Township, Pennsylvania after police responded to a domestic dispute call on December 7. He died last week. Police claim that he walked towards them with a

knife in his hand.

These killings follow the shooting of Francisco Serna, a 73-year-old man suffering from dementia, by Bakersfield, California police last weekend. Police say they shot and killed the man in his neighbor's driveway when he refused to take his hands out of his pockets. He was unarmed and had been holding a wooden crucifix in his jacket.

An autopsy released on Thursday reported that Serna was struck by five of the seven bullets shot at him by police officer Reagan Selmán.

Based on the averages published by the BJS for 2015, something on the order of 10,000 people have been killed by police during the eight years of the Obama administration. Since protests erupted over the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in August 2014, the number of police killings has, if anything, only increased.

Along with an overall policy of war and social reaction, the incoming Trump administration has pledged to give police greater powers and an even freer hand to commit violence throughout the country.



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