

Phoenix police shootings on track to double in 2018

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Phoenix, Arizona, officials and the city's police chief, Jeri Williams, announced an investigation into the frequency of police shootings in the area last week following a spike in Phoenix area officer-involved shootings.

According to data provided by the city council's Public Safety and Veterans Subcommittee, Phoenix police have shot 23 people, 11 fatally, so far in 2018. In comparison, Phoenix police officers shot 21 people in 2017, 25 people in 2016, and 17 in 2015. Phoenix police are on pace to far surpass the totals for each of the past five years and could potentially double the number of people they have killed this year than in the past.

Not a single officer involved in any this year's shootings has yet been charged.

Arizona has typically ranked among the top states for officer-involved shootings, but this year's surge in police shootings distinguishes the state even more. Maricopa County is on pace to match the rate of police shootings in Los Angeles County, which has twice the number of residents.

Data maintained by the *Arizona Republic* shows that officers in all of Maricopa County, which includes Phoenix, its' suburbs and outlying areas, have been involved in 43 shootings total.

With 10 million people, Los Angeles County recorded 78 officer-involved shootings last year and just 36 so far this year—seven fewer than Maricopa County, with a population of 4.3 million.

City officials responded to growing outrage over the surge in police shootings at a public meeting last week by recommending that \$149,000 be used for an independent study to be spearheaded by Arizona State University and the Washington, DC-based Police Foundation. The investigation is aimed at tamping

down popular anger and will ultimately result in a whitewash of the crimes committed by the Phoenix Police Department.

Phoenix Police Chief Jeri Williams, an African American woman, explained that the study would be aimed at creating policies that provided citizens information on how to interact with police officers, suggesting that it is the victims and not officers that are at fault for the surge in shootings.

Residents that attended the meeting told the *Arizona Republic* they felt such a study would only reinforce the narrative that most, if not all, police shootings are justified.

Heather Hamel, executive director of the advocacy group Justice That Works, challenged Williams' perspective on the study. "It's your guys misunderstanding. It's not the increase in violence among our community," she said. "It's actually an increase in violence among your police officers."

Viridiana Hernandez told reporters she thought that Phoenix police would admit they had a shooting problem but was disappointed when she found out the character of the investigation.

"I come here and I hear that the talking points that are being reiterated are ... that it blames us for being killed," she told the *Republic*. "There's never going to be moving forward. I don't care how much people want to say it, how much you want to pretend that we're trying to build trust. Trust will never be built until the abuser admits that they are doing the abusing."

The rise in shootings in Phoenix is part of the ongoing nation-wide wave of police violence which is being fueled by the Trump Administration's appeal to fascistic elements and encouragement of police brutality.

During his presidential campaign, Trump criticized

Obama for taking an aggressive policy against police, ignoring the fact that the Obama administration oversaw a rise in police brutality, funneled military-style equipment to local police forces across the US, and coordinated the crackdown on protest against police violence.

Under Obama, the Department of Justice (DoJ) undertook various investigations into police departments that routinely violated residents' civil and constitutional rights. The DoJ routinely denounced police departments, but only offered toothless reforms and oversight, such as "community policing" and greater use of body cams. The number of people killed by police continued to rise during Obama's presidency.

Since taking office, Trump and Attorney General Jeff Sessions have adopted a "tough on crime" policy that takes an even more encouraging approach to police abuses. Early in his presidency, Trump signed executive orders which promoted legislation protecting police and even told police not to be "too nice" during arrests.

In April, the Supreme Court established an interpretation of qualified immunity that effectively granted police legal impunity to use lethal force at will. The Court ruled officers are entitled to qualified immunity as long as they do not violate clearly established rights and use of force must be judged from the perspective of officers. This interpretation essentially protects all but the most unscrupulous cops from excessive force cases.

A special role has been played by Black Lives Matter (BLM), an organization that supposedly campaigns against police violence and the rise of officer-involved shootings. Co-opting popular protests against police brutality and promoting the false idea that police violence is fundamentally a racial issue, the organization has championed illusions that police departments can be "reformed."

BLM has consistently pushed for various reforms, including increasing use of body cameras, the introduction of public oversight boards and more minority police officers, as supposed solutions to police violence. The group even worked to direct anger away from Sacramento's first African-American police chief, Daniel Hahn, after the police murder of Stephen Clark in March.

Operating in the orbit of the Democratic Party, BLM

actively seeks to hide the role of police as instruments of class repression under capitalism.

More than 20 percent of Phoenix's residents live in poverty, and Arizona ranks among some of the most unequal states in the US, with the wealthiest 1 percent earning 20 times more than the average resident. This elite layer accounted for 84 percent of the state's income growth for a 28-year period leading up to the 2008-09 financial crisis and saw their incomes grow 5.9 percent during the Great Recession, while the rest of earners lost income. The high levels of social inequality and poverty in the state are powerful factors in the rise in officer-involved shootings.



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