Behind the epidemic of police killings in America: Class, poverty and race

Part three

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St. Louis and Ferguson

There are 110 suburbs and metro areas represented in the jurisdictions in which police killed civilians, accounting for 121 killed (12.3 percent) while they made up 7.4 percent of the population in USA?. The mean household income for these regions was considerably higher than the national average at $68,100, the proportion in poverty much lower, at 9.3 percent. Blacks were overrepresented among the victims, making up 19.8 percent of those killed though representing 8.3 percent of that population.

As stated earlier, blacks killed by police are over-represented in urban centers, with the proportion double their percentage of the population. We undertook a ZIP Code analysis of several cities (Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Jacksonville, Kansas City and St. Louis) by mapping the location of the killing as reported in the news. The demographics for these were then found through the US Census Bureau website. We will use St. Louis as a case example of our findings as they were essentially repeated in each of these cities, although St. Louis has the highest rate of police killings, underscoring that the rebellion over the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, a nearby working-class suburb of St. Louis, was in response to a more generalized sense of outrage.

The population of St. Louis is 311,404. The median household income is significantly lower than the national average at $36,809 with 26.7 percent of the population living in poverty. The demographics have non-Hispanic whites at 42.7 percent, blacks or African-Americans at 47.9 percent and Hispanics at 3.9 percent. Seven of the twelve people killed (58.3 percent) were black. Not only are blacks shot in predominately black neighborhoods, but they are also the poorest with median household income even below the city average and poverty levels three times the national average. St. Louis also ranks as the city with the highest rate of police killings. The table below indicates that it leads with twice the rates of killing compared to Glendale, AZ, part of the Phoenix metro area, which has 16.3 killed per million. Interestingly, large metropolitan areas such as New York, Chicago or Los Angeles have much lower rates.

How the states compare

A state by state analysis provided the following findings. California had the most killings at 162, though it ranked 17 in the rate of killings. Texas had 69 killed and ranked 32. Florida had 58 killings and ranked 30. Arizona had 44 killings ranking 6 and Washington had 38 killings and ranked 14. Missouri with 31 killings ranked 31 and Illinois with 20 killings ranked 43. Nebraska was the only state that had no killings reported.

Nineteen states and the District of Columbia had fewer than ten police killings, making further statistical analysis inaccurate due to small numbers. These states only accounted for fifteen African-Americans killed (6.5 percent of all blacks killed), because they had, for the most part, small black populations. Only Connecticut, Delaware, Maryland and the District of Columbia had a black population of more than 10 percent. Twelve states had no African-Americans killed by police.

Of the remaining 31 states, 16 states had higher observed numbers of African-Americans killed than would be expected based on their population. For instance, in California, there were 23 black persons killed (14 percent) while they make up only 6.5 percent of the population. The P-value at 0.0001 means this discrepancy is highly significant. The other states with disproportionate numbers of African-Americans killed by police included Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin. Again, southern states with the worst history of racial oppression—Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia and South Carolina—had no significant racial component to their police killings.

When considering only the cities, towns and counties where police killings actually took place, i.e., Florida? instead of Florida, the racial disparity became non-significant in nine of the 16 states: Florida, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. Only California, Illinois, Missouri, New York, Oregon, Texas, and Washington had persistent higher than expected rates of blacks killed.

For Hispanics, only New Mexico and California were statistically significant for higher than expected killings.

When the data was analyzed for mean household incomes and percentage in poverty, the regions in which the killings occurred had lower income and higher poverty than compared to their respective state as a whole except as noted in Table 2. Only four states, all with small numbers of police killings, showed deaths occurring in areas with higher income. Only seven states, with similarly small numbers of police killings, showed lower poverty levels in areas where killings took place.

We also compared the reported rates of gun involved, weapons used, and those unarmed within this cohort of police killings. There was no significant racial difference in these categories.

Of the women in the cohort who were killed, 35.6 percent had mental illness, compared to men with mental illness accounting for 23.4 percent,

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a large difference which was statistically significant. Also, white and Asian victims had a higher rate of mental illness as compared to blacks and Hispanics. Whites had a rate of 29.6 percent compared to blacks at 17.6 percent.

Tragically, people with mental illness were more likely to face off against the police than to flee. Of 228 people with mental illness, 85.1 percent did not run away. Of 709 people without mental illness, 57.1 percent did not flee.

Summary and conclusions

When we begin to pore over the number of blacks or whites killed by the police, there is a danger that we both legitimize and disregard the overarching question as to why the police kill so many people year after year.

As the data has shown, the US is not a homogenous nation and there are wide variations in income, poverty level and racial composition, and between urban, suburban, small town settings. Blacks are killed in vastly disproportionate numbers in larger urban centers and continue to be over-represented in smaller urban centers. However, half of all police killings occur in rural areas where the majority is non-Hispanic white, though these areas represent a much smaller fraction of the national population. It is here where white deaths begin to "catch up" to black deaths, and ultimately surpass them.

This data may seem surprising, but it gives credence to the perspective that the focus of many of the most recent high profile police shootings was in large urban centers where blacks were the victims. Poor whites are in essence invisible to the national discussion on police killings. What the present data show is that what whites and blacks who are killed by police have in common is poverty. Rural communities are devastated by low wages and the opioid crisis, rising suicide rates and limited access to social services. This may well be a contributing factor to the higher rate of mental illness seen among white victims of police violence, compared to blacks and Hispanics.

The state-to-state variation also corroborates our hypothesis and method. These figures also demonstrate that the regions within states where killings occur tend to lower median household income and higher levels of poverty as compared to the state as a whole.

With regards to the lower than expected rates of Hispanics being killed by police, the finding remains speculative and requires study. We mapped all the killings by race. Where blacks and whites live throughout the country, and are killed by police in 49 of the 50 states, Hispanics are killed predominately along the Mexican border and the Eastern seaboard. Of the nearly 59 million in the Hispanic populations, as many as ten million may be illegal immigrants. The majority of Hispanics in the US are foreign-born or the first generation born in the US. Their historical experience and cultural backgrounds may contribute to these lower rates of police killings despite sharing similar poverty rates as African-Americans.

Since the financial crisis of 2008, conditions for the working class have become direr as well-paying jobs with benefits have essentially been erased and replaced with low wage labor. Foreclosures, homelessness, and unemployment in inner cities have become a permanent reality for them. A report by Paul Jargowsky of the Century Foundation titled, "Architecture of Segregation: Civil Unrest, the Concentration of Poverty, and Public Policy," noted that "neighborhoods of extreme poverty where 40 percent live at or below the poverty level have doubled since 2000 from 7.2 million to 13.8 million (5 million Blacks, 4.3 million Hispanics, and 3.5 million non-Hispanic Whites.)"

The report also notes a 76 percent increase in high-poverty census tracts (above 40 percent living in poverty), to 4,412 in 2013, affecting blacks most. The number of census tracts with poverty ranging from 20 to 40 percent has increased by 55 percent to 17,391 in 2013. However, the growth in poverty has been fastest for non-Hispanic whites.

The report also notes that small to mid-sized metropolitan areas where population ranges from 250,000 to one million people have experienced the greatest increase in concentrated poverty. This is congruent with our analysis of city rankings of police killings, in which St. Louis topped the list, followed by a number of other medium-sized cities. Large metropolitan areas where concentrated poverty remains high have had more stability by comparison.

In metropolitan areas, wealthy suburbs have used exclusionary zoning to prevent the establishment of affordable housing, keeping low-income people out. According to Jargowsky, "The whole process is legally enforced through zoning, and underwritten by the mortgage interest deduction and all the subsidies that go into building roads, sewers, and schools for new suburbs … The concentration of poverty is the product of larger structural forces, political decisions, and institutional arrangements that are too often taken for granted. Our governance and development practice ensure that significant segments of our population live in neighborhoods where there is no work, where there are underperforming schools, and where there is little access to opportunity."

It shouldn't come as a surprise that the police patrol the boundaries between the affluent neighborhoods and poverty zones. But aside from protecting the property of the affluent, the police function to protect the state apparatus from the disenchantment of the working class. As Trotsky noted, "The bourgeoisie invariably and unswervingly follows the rule: 'the main enemy is in one's own country.'"

It is difficult to dispute this observation even today. In recent decades there has been a rapid militarization of the police force as was witnessed in Ferguson, Missouri, after the Michael Brown killing, and in Boston after the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing. There are approximately 750,000 police officers in the US working within 17,985 agencies. Seven percent growth in the next decade is expected. Their annual budget exceeds $150 billion. Oakland and Chicago police budgets account for nearly 40 percent of their general fund. The police budgets for New York, Los Angeles and Chicago exceed one billion dollars per year. This force, second in size only to the US Army, is needed to defend the ruling class from the "enemy within."

Despite the overwhelming evidence of the role of socio-economic factors related to the class structure of American society, the Democratic Party and its affiliates like Black Lives Matter, the Democratic Socialists of America and other pseudo-left organizations hide behind a racial narrative to account for the crisis of police violence and attempt to enforce reform measures such as ensuring that the demographics of the police force mirror the communities they "serve." The truth is that a black policeman in Detroit is not serving black people or the "black community," he is serving General Motors, Detroit Edison, Comerica Bank and the rest of the capitalist class, playing the same role as a white policeman. And as a point of fact, blacks make up 12 percent of the police force nationwide, roughly the same as their proportion in the population.

The pseudo-left groups promote racialist conceptions to defend the capitalist economic system in which their own material interests are rooted, one in which a tiny fraction of the population, less than one percent, controls the vast bulk of the resources and relies on the police as a vital line of defense for its wealth and privileges.

Concluded

Links to Interactive Maps

2017 Police Killings 987 People

2017 Police Killings Asian American 19 people

2017 Police Killings Blacks 231 people

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2017 Police Killings 208 Hispanics
2017 Police Killings 25 Native Americans
2017 Police Killings 478 Whites
2017 Police Killings State Ranking

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