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

Part three

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PART ONE | PART TWO | PART THREE

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, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana, Michigan, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Texas, Washington, 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,
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 out the number of blacks or whites killed by police, the finding remains speculative and requires study. We mapped the data onto the vital line of defense for its wealth and privileges.

Links to Interactive Maps

2017 Police Killings Blacks 231 people
2017 Police Killings Asian American 19 people
2017 Police Killings 987 People
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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