

For fifth year in a row, US police kill more than one thousand

George Gallanis
7 January 2019

Under growing social inequality and an upsurge in the class struggle, the year 2018 marked the fifth year in a row that police killed more than 1,000 people across the United States.

The fact that thousands of people, the vast majority of them working class and poor, have been killed at the hands of the police in just the last five years is an expression of the brutality of capitalist rule and the immense scale of social inequality in the United States. As American imperialism ravages nations across the world by means of military violence, it increasingly brings the war home in the form of brutality and murder by an increasingly militarized police force.

Following the police killings of Michael Brown, Freddie Grey, Philando Castile and Laquan McDonald, to name only a few of the most notorious cases since 2014, the police continued their murderous rampage in 2018:

- In March, police in Sacramento, California shot unarmed Stephon Clark, a 22-year-old African American man, 20 times in his grandparents' backyard.
- On April 5, police shot and killed Diante Yarber, 26, in Barstow, California, claiming afterward that he was driving toward them. The father of three daughters was fired on 30 times and hit approximately 24 times. His lawyer described the incident as the worst form of "excessive and unnecessary force" he had ever seen.
- In May, 54-year-old John Corneil was shot and killed in rural Maine after carrying a toy weapon.
- In June, unarmed Anthony Marcel Green, 33 years old, was killed by police as he fled from police in Kingsland, Georgia.
- In late July, 25-year-old Daniel Hambrick was shot in the back and killed as he ran from a traffic stop in Nashville, Tennessee.
- In September, Dereshia Blackwell, a 39-year-old black woman armed with a gun and knife, was shocked with a stun gun and then shot and killed by police in Missouri City, Texas.
- In October, police in Monroe County, Georgia shot and killed Ida Christy Stiles, a 42-year-old white woman while she was holding a toy weapon.
- In November, 33-year-old Christopher William Parrish, a white male, was shot and killed in Ogden, Utah. Police stated he was armed with a rock.

As of this writing, Mapping Police Violence (MPV) reports that police killed 1,122 people in 2018, somewhat less than the 1,147 reported the previous year. In all of 2018, there were only 22 days when police did not kill someone.

MPV defines police killings as a "case where a person dies as a

result of being chased, beaten, arrested, restrained, shot, pepper sprayed, tasered, or otherwise harmed by police officers, whether on-duty or off-duty, intentional or accidental."

According to the *Washington Post*, which only tracks police shootings and does not include other types of police killings, such as taserings and beatings, police killed 996 in 2018, slightly higher than their total of 987 from 2017.

The online aggregator Killedbypolice.net, which defines police killings similarly to MPV, stopped tracking police killings in July of 2018, citing financial strains.

The finding that over a thousand people have been killed for the fifth year in a row is based on data gathered by Killedbypolice.net and MPV. Killedbypolice.net reports that US police killed 1,114 people in 2014, 1,222 in 2015, 1,171 in 2016 and 1,194 in 2017.

Combined with MPV's data showing that police killed 1,122 people in 2018, the total number of people killed by US police over the past five years is 5,923, more than the total number of US soldiers killed in combat in Iraq since the 2003 invasion.

Yet, for all the thousands killed, cops are rarely ever charged or, if charged, convicted. According to research by Philip Stinson, an associate professor of criminal justice at Bowling Green State University in Ohio, between 2005 and April 2017, during which thousands were killed by police, only 80 police officers were arrested for murder or manslaughter.

In 2015, during the Obama administration, MPV found that 99 percent of police killings resulted in no conviction of a police officer. This is in part because capitalist law in the US gives police officers immense leeway to violently attack civilians under the legal doctrine of "perceived threat." The proclaimed perception of being under threat is sufficient to exempt a cop from conviction for using deadly violence, even if the victim turns out to have been unarmed.

It is also because the Democratic Obama administration, no less than Republican ones, defended the "right" of the police to employ violence against workers and young people. In fact, the Obama Justice Department repeatedly intervened in the federal courts on the side of the police in cases where victims of police violence or misconduct sued for redress.

At the same time, Obama sought to cover up his defense of police brutality and divert the anger of tens of thousands who protested against police killings by framing the question entirely as a racial issue, thereby obscuring the more fundamental social and class issues.

Although African Americans are killed by police in numbers disproportionate to their share of the US population, reflecting in part the racism of cops, the largest number of those killed by police are white—the *Washington Post* reported that in 2018 police killed 397 white people and 209 black people—and the most important factor in determining who is targeted by the police is social class. The victims of police violence are overwhelmingly working class and poor, of all races and ethnicities.

Perhaps most striking and revealing is the response by the pseudo-left to the continued bloodletting by American police. Calls for protests to police killings by pseudo-left organizations, such as the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), the International Socialist Organization (ISO), and Black Lives Matter (BLM), have declined dramatically in recent years. These groups, who represent not the interest of the working class but of upper-middle-class layers, have sought to portray police killings primarily as the product of racism within American society.

Touted as the leading organization against police killings by the bourgeois media, BLM, which created the popular hashtag #blacklivesmatter, has expressed this the most sharply.

During the mass popular protests in Ferguson, Missouri in which workers and youth protested over the police killing of Michael Brown by Darren Wilson, the mainstream media declared BLM as the leaders of the protest. This was part of the ruling-class effort to divert the anger of workers and youth into the dead-end politics of BLM, which operates in the orbit of the Democratic Party.

There is a genuine fear among the ruling class that a new mass protest against police violence could spark a wider movement that might develop into a political movement against capitalism.

The protest of Ferguson and the subsequent events that followed expressed a growing radicalization among workers and youth in the United States. The American ruling class took note and has sought to avoid the recurrences of larger protests. It has relied on BLM and other pseudo-left groups to divert workers and youth into the dead end of identity politics.

Since its inception over five years ago, BLM, which has thoroughly integrated itself into the Democratic Party and received a \$100-million-dollar grant from the Ford Foundation, has all but abandoned its calls for any type of mass action or protest against police killings and has focused its efforts on reformist police policies and promoting Democratic candidates.

Alicia Garza, one of the three cofounders of the BLM movement, stated openly in 2017 that BLM has moved away from protests. She said, “What people are seeing is that there are less demonstrations. A lot of that is that people are channeling their energy into organizing locally, recognizing that in Trump’s America, our communities are under direct attack.”

Patrisse Cullors, also a cofounder of BLM, told *Mic* in July 2018, “I’m so grateful that in this time, especially under this current government, that we created a movement five years ago. It gave us a blueprint on how you fight back. We’ve seen the Women’s March. We’ve seen the March for Our Lives. They’ve used it to change policy, to change culture.”

She later told ABC News, “There are so many different elected officials, both black and white, who are challenging the status quo right now,” commenting that the recent election of Democratic

representative and DSA member Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez in New York was “a testament to our movement.”

The unrelenting wave of police killings is an indictment of the bankrupt politics of the pseudo-left and their promotion of racist politics as an antidote to police violence in the United States. Moreover, their insistence on race as the primary factor in police killings has only created confusion and sown illusions in police reform.

The problem of police violence is ultimately a political one. To understand the nature of the police is to comprehend the dynamics of capitalism and the state. The police are part of the state’s arsenal to carry out the mandates of the ruling elite and ultimately to protect the interests of private property. The state, with its police, military, border patrol and spy agencies, exists as a repressive instrument in the irreconcilable conflict between the ruling class and the working class.

It is dangerously misleading to declare that police repression is fundamentally the result of racism. Such a position makes the problem of police brutality an ideological one, and not a class question bound up with the system of capitalism. It, moreover, promotes the delusion that the police can be rehabilitated or replaced with some other, more “equitable” force under capitalism.

Police murder and violence affect the entire working class, regardless of race. White workers are killed in the largest numbers and bear no special privilege from the brutality of the police.

An analysis of police killings for the year 2017 conducted by the *World Socialist Web Site* found that working-class white men in rural areas are killed at similar rates to those of black men in cities and urban areas. The report also found that the majority of those killed came from working-class and poor backgrounds, making clear that class, not race, is the ultimate factor in police killings.

The killing of people in primarily working-class and poor areas is the direct and indirect expression of class rule. In promoting a racist narrative, BLM, the DSA, the ISO and others aim to divide the working class and channel social opposition back behind the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and in doing so defuse popular opposition to state violence.



To contact the WSW and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact