Use of lethal force by US county sheriff's deputies on the rise

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An investigation by CBS News details the rising rate of lethal force used by sheriff's deputies around the United States. According to the report, county sheriff's offices are three times more deadly than city police departments.

Last year saw the greatest number of people killed by police in the past 10 years, with 1,247 people killed in 2023. It was the tenth year in a row in which more than 1,000 people were killed by police, which is likely an underestimate. Law enforcement agencies are required to report any use of lethal force, but a report by the Government Accountability Office found that at least 70 percent of states were failing to meet reporting requirements in 2021. A study by *The Lancet* found that in Oklahoma 84 percent of deaths in police custody were not reported.

Urban areas often garner the most media attention, but a steady rise in killings in rural areas at the hands of county sheriff's deputies has played a significant role in the increase in police killings over the last decade. The report documents that county deputies are significantly, and increasingly, more deadly than police departments at a rate per 100,000 arrests made, with police departments killing 9.7 per 100,000 arrests in 2022 compared to 27.3 per 100,000 by county sheriff's departments.

And the death rate has been rising. In 2013 the death rate per 100,000 arrests by county deputies was 13.4. At its peak in 2021 the rate was 30.8 killings per 100,000.

CBS News noted that this is largely driven by an increase in rural police killings in states like Wyoming and New Mexico, where county deputies are often responsible for large areas and sometimes take over the responsibilities of local police departments that close down in smaller towns.

A lack of oversight and accountability for county sheriff's departments is a significant issue noted in the report. It cites a particular incident where McCurtin County, Oklahoma, Sheriff Kevin Clardy was caught on an audiotape from March 2023, talking with county leaders about killing and disposing the bodies of two local journalists who were reporting on corruption in his office.

Despite a public scandal over corruption and the audio tape, with even Governor Kevin Stitt calling for Clardy to resign, the sheriff remained in office. While sheriffs are elected officials, ostensibly answerable to the public and subject to recall, it is rare for them to be removed from office, and candidates often run unopposed and can remain in power for decades.

It is also rare for the federal government to intervene to charge county sheriff's deputies with misconduct. CBS reports that since 1994 the Department of Justice has only filed seven cases against sheriff's offices for "pattern or practice" violations of civil rights. No cases were filed during the Trump administration, and the Biden administration has only filed one.

Even if law enforcement agencies do report lethal force properly, it is incredibly rare for officers to face any consequences for their actions. According to Mapping Police Violence, officers were charged with a crime in only 10 cases last year, less than 1 percent of killings by police. Some killings resulted from an immediate threat to officers or civilians, but in the majority of cases reported a person was killed during a traffic stop or a suspected non-violent offense.

Media and academic coverage of police violence is often hyper-fixated on the racial component of police violence. They draw attention to the disparities between the share of police shooting deaths by each racial group and their share of the overall population without

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probing the broader social issues at hand.

There are certainly racial prejudices in policing. Police departments actively recruit from the most backward and right-wing sections of society and have a history of connections to fascistic and racist organizations like the Klu Klux Klan.

But police violence cannot be explained in purely racial terms or at an arbitrary spatial scale. Whites make up the plurality of police violence victims, and the rise in killings by sheriff's deputies expresses an increase in police violence in rural areas, regions of the US where residents are predominantly white.

Police killings in urban areas have slightly declined, with the decline being more than made up for by an increase in rural areas. These increases are most clearly shown in the increase in the rate of police killings in Western states, where the rate of police killings is highest, such as New Mexico, Alaska, Colorado and Wyoming, as well as other rural states, such as Oklahoma and West Virginia.

In most of these states the rate of police killings per 1 million people is highest among the black population, but the rate is not always the best indicator. In New Mexico there have been 25.2 police killings of black people per 1 million population, compared to 7.5 for white people since 2013, but black victims made up only 4 percent of police killings in the state. In Wyoming black victims have a rate of 37.1 per million but are only 2 out of the 39 people killed over the past 10 years.

Such figures factor in the demographics for a whole state, even when the killings may be localized or subject to broader geographic trends.

When looking at killings by county deputies, there is a clear propensity towards white victims in rural areas. Since 2013 there have been at least 3,841 killings by deputies, about a quarter of the total police killings in the US and likely an undercount. White victims were the majority with the 2,071 deaths, or about 54 percent. Black Americans make up the second highest share with 17 percent, and Hispanics are third with 13 percent.

These figures demonstrate the importance in geography when reviewing the demographic data. For black victims there have been 1,067 in urban areas, 1,179 in suburban and 267 in rural areas, according to the data by Mapping Police Violence since 2013. As a percentage of the total this is 33, 36 and 8 percent respectively. For white victims, the geographic breakdown is 698 in urban, 2,233 in suburban and 1,448 in rural areas, or 12, 40 and 26 percent respectively.

People from black, Asian and Hispanic backgrounds are more likely to be killed in urban to suburban areas. While people from white, Pacific Islander, Native American and undetermined racial backgrounds are more likely to be killed in rural to suburban areas. This means that people are more likely to be killed by the police in the areas where they live.

Fundamentally, it is class and not race that is the primary driver behind police violence. Based on US Census data of the census tracts in which police killings occur compared to census tracts in which they do not, victims of police violence generally live in areas with higher rates of poverty, lower median household income, higher rates of food stamp and public assistance use, higher rates of people who did not graduate from high school and an increased share of people in working class occupations.

Police violence is fundamentally a product of capitalist violence against the working class. It is the result of an increasingly militarized police system that has been prepared over decades to violently suppress the working class at the first sign of opposition. This was demonstrated by the violent police crackdowns against the George Floyd protests in 2020 and most recently in the brutal attacks on anti-genocide protesters on college campuses around the country.

The official narrative—that police violence is a purely racial issue that could be resolved with more black police chiefs and cops and better training—falls apart under scrutiny and is exposed as an attempt to divide the working class. The police are an instrument of class rule and cannot be reformed into murdering fewer people. They must be abolished, along with the entire capitalist system and replaced with a socialist system based on human need and not private profit.

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