

# Fatal police shootings of unarmed Black people in US more than three times as high as in Whites

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The rate of fatal police shootings of unarmed Black people in the US is more than 3 times as high as it is among White people, finds research published online in the *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*.

And the total numbers of Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) killed in police shootings hasn't budged over the past 5 years, prompting the researchers to describe the figures as a "public health emergency."

Deaths caused by police violence in the US are disproportionately high among BIPOC, but it's not clear if the rate of these deaths might have changed over time.

The researchers therefore looked at trends in fatal police shootings, overall, and according to whether the victim was armed, to quantify years of life lost across racial/[ethnic groups](#) between 2015 and 2020.

They drew on publicly available data compiled by The Washington Post on every person killed by on-duty police officers in the US during this period.

The data, which were sourced from local news reports, independent databases, and additional reporting at the paper, include details of the race, age and sex of the victims, as well any item in their possession perceived to be a weapon.

The researchers calculated the rate of [death](#) and years of life lost by race/ethnic group for all fatal police shootings per quarter, per million (ppqm) of the population from 2015 to the first quarter of 2020; and for fatal police shootings involving an unarmed victim, per half-year per million (phpm) of the population, from 2015 to 2019.

Estimates of years of life lost were based on national historical life expectancy data for US citizens in the victim's birth year compared with their actual age at death.

Some 5367 fatal police shootings were reported by the Washington Post from 2015 to May 2020; missing details on race/ethnicity or age left a total of 4653 deaths for analysis.

Half the [shooting](#) fatalities were of Whites (51%), followed by Blacks (27%), Hispanics (19%), Asians (2%) and Native Americans (nearly 2%). Given the racial/ethnic proportions of the US population, the disproportionate killings of BIPOC point to a public health crisis, say the researchers.

The average age at death was 34, but Black victims tended to be younger (30) while White victims tended to be older (38).

There was a small, but statistically significant, 1% fall in the death rate for White victims only over the 5 year period.

Average deaths per quarter were highest among Native Americans (1.74 ppqm), followed by Blacks (1.49 ppqm), Hispanics (0.74 ppqm), Whites (0.57 ppqm) and Asians (0.25 ppqm).

Native Americans were 3 times more likely to be shot dead than Whites, while Blacks were more than 2.5 times, and Hispanics 29% more likely; deaths among Asians were significantly lower than among Whites.

The victims were unarmed in 1 in 6 (753;16%) fatal shootings. Rates among unarmed Black and Hispanic victims were significantly higher than they were among White victims: more than 3 times as high and 45% higher, respectively.

These unarmed deaths contributed significantly to years of life lost: 15,037 out of 29,099 such deaths. Unarmed victims were also younger than the overall victim pool.

The researchers calculated that the annual average of years of life lost due to fatal police shootings in the U.S. was 31,960—equivalent to 83% of those caused by cyclist road injuries; 78% of those due to unintentional firearm injuries; 63% of those due to meningitis; and 57% of those caused by maternal deaths.

What's more, rates of years of life lost for Black and Native American people were 3-4 times the rate among White people.

"Racism alone does not explain our findings," say the researchers. Rather, "Our findings suggest the influence of an insidious anti-Black and anti-Indigenous logic to [police violence](#) that warrants further exploration into the role of these factors in fatal police encounters."

Demilitarisation of the police is needed, they suggest. "The US Military offloads surplus weaponry to local police and use of force policies lack specificity and standardisation," they explain.

"Further, only 16 states require de-escalation training, which would equip officers to distinguish a threat from a civilian in crisis. Militarisation hastens the transition from disproportionate policing to disproportionate mortality."

"Fatal [police](#) shootings are a public health emergency," they conclude, urging health professionals to help drive policy efforts to "reduce this unjust burden and move us towards achieving health equity in the US."

**More information:** Racial inequity in fatal US police shootings, 2015-2020, *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, [DOI: 10.1136/jech-2020-215097](#)

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