

Vera Institute of Justice

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://www.vera.org/blog/truth-in-numbers>

Public Facing Advocacy Writing

Eight minutes and 46 seconds. Around the country, people are coming to grips with just how much time Derek Chauvin and the three other officers standing by had to spare the life of George Floyd, to see him as a man, not unlike themselves. Few numbers will ever become such a potent symbol of a larger truth that a Black person's life is still deemed worth so very little in America.

Months from now, a judge and jury will consider what happened in Minneapolis in the early morning of May 25, 2020. They'll watch the footage of Officer Chauvin, knee on Floyd's neck, his own hand casually in his pocket. They'll be reminded that this police encounter was sparked by nothing more than an alleged counterfeit \$20 bill.

Twenty dollars.

Eight minutes and 46 seconds.

Those numbers will once again loom large as a measure of the degree to which racism pervades the country's approach to law enforcement and society writ large.

At Vera, we seek the truth in numbers. Turning to the *Washington Post* [database](#), started in 2015 and available publicly online, we were able to compile a partial picture of racial disparities in police killings nationwide.

Here's some of what we found: Since 2015, Black people in the United States have been fatally shot by police at a rate almost three times higher than white people. More telling, when the victim of a fatal police shooting is unarmed, the racial disparity is even greater with Black people four times more likely to be shot and killed.

Every police encounter threatens escalation, injury, and death, and there is no exception for young people. Michael Brown was 18 when a white officer killed him. Willie McCoy was 20. Rekia Boyd was 22 when she was shot by an off-duty police detective. Breonna Taylor was barely older at 26. Tamir Rice was only 12. Black people make up 13 percent of the U.S. population, but in deadly police shootings involving people under age 25, 41 percent of victims are Black. Fewer than a third of such victims are white, although white people constitute 60 percent of the U.S. population. This means a young Black person in America is six times more likely than a white peer to be shot and killed by police. Six times.

These numbers are only for fatal shootings, not choke holds or other uses of force; only over the past five years; and only because reporters at the *Washington Post* care enough to routinely scan local news reports, social media, the few law enforcement websites that publish this information, and other independent sources. *The Root* has recently undertaken [a similar data collection effort](#) with D. Brian Burghart, founder of [Fatal Encounters](#) to include additional causes of death during law enforcement encounters, beyond shootings. Neither of these data sets is perfect, nor entirely accurate, but until law enforcement agencies are required to report all deaths that occur during encounters with police, they are the best chance we have at estimating the enormity of the crisis we're facing.

We've long known the harsh realities of overenforcement in Black and brown neighborhoods, police violence, and racially disproportionate fatal shootings through the lived experiences of Black people and other people of color. Quantifying these truths will provide the basis for true accountability.

How did we get here?

Organized policing began as slave patrols in the American South in the mid-1800s. Although policing has modernized with the times, it remains warped by racism. We don't need numbers to understand that. The steady stream of gut-wrenching videos capturing murder in action and the many names and accounts throughout history, long before there were smartphones and body cams, is proof enough. That's why people are marching, holding vigils, and making statements long overdue. As Michelle Alexander wrote in a *New York Times* [opinion piece](#), Our nation suddenly caught a glimpse of itself in the mirror and people of all races poured into the streets to say no more.

But if Americans are committed to actually ending the terrorization and murder of Black people by police, we need reliable, real-time data to hold individual officers and all police agencies accountable. It's beyond disappointing that even the FBI has failed to create a comprehensive national database of use of force. Their lackluster attempt in 2019 was found to overlook more than half of deadly police shootings that the *Washington Post* documented, likely because participation by departments was voluntary. This must change.

Contributing to data transparency, Vera has compiled a [directory of links to official police datasets](#) for 72 cities—the 50 largest cities in the country and the largest city in each state. We're collecting real-time data about police overreach in enforcement, especially against Black people and in communities of color, to address the drivers of police brutality, violence, and misconduct.

In this moment of austerity budgets, high unemployment rates, and fraying health care and public welfare systems, money spent criminalizing mainly poor Black and brown people should instead be invested in communities as a concrete step toward narrowing and eventually ending racial and economic disparities in health care, education, housing, and more. Our communities deserve better.

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