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Article Reflection: Police Shootings Database

This article discusses fatal shootings within the United States by the police force and the demographics of the victims. The investigation surrounding an unarmed Black citizen, Michael Brown, revealed that approximately half of fatal police shootings are not being reported by the responsible departments since it is not mandatory for police departments to report this information. This prompted The Washington Post to create a database that gathers this data from police reports, news accounts, and social media posts. Since 2015, when the Washington Post began tracking the police shootings, there has been consistency in the number of shootings annually, as well as the demographics of the victims being targeted. These fatal shootings occur in every state of the U.S. and at a higher rate in heavily populated areas. New Mexico, Alaska, and Oklahoma have the most shootings in the nation.

According to the database, there are approximately 1,000 fatal police shootings per year. However, the Black and Hispanic communities are disproportionately targeted compared to the rest of the U.S. population. Although Black Americans only make up 13% of the population in the nation, they make up more than double the number of white victims. To put it in another perspective, there are 32 Black Americans who are murdered by on-duty officers per million, while there are 13 white Americans per million

who are killed. As for the Hispanic community, there are 13 Hispanic Americans per millions who get fatally shot by the police. This article has also observed ages and genders of the victims. Victims who are between the ages of 20 and 40 years old make up greater than half of the dataset. Additionally, more than 95% of the victims are male, with 5402 men compared to 249 women who have been shot by officers.

In regards to the database, there are various ways that the software system can have failure. This system directly includes personal and easily identifiable details pertaining to the victims. It is in no way protecting the privacy of the individuals or their families. As of now, the database has filters users can use to search, such as the state, gender, race, age, if they had a mental illness, type of weapon, if there was a body camera, how they fled the scene, and the year of the incident. Additionally, users can directly search for victims by name. Even for the entries that do not have names, it lists the location and date. Thus, people may use other sources to identify these unnamed victims, which is a serious privacy issue.

Moreover, the article describes how certain groups in the U.S. are disproportionately targeted, so those who do not belong to these groups may also be easily identified if their name is not already listed. For example, I used the filters "Arizona," "female," and "Black." There was a single search result, identifying "Jonie Block, a 27-year-old Black woman armed with a gun, was shot on May 15, 2017, in a park in Phoenix, Ariz." The database also points out that she did not seem to have a mental illness, there was no body cam recording, and she did not flee the scene. Having all of this information easily accessible by the public can be damaging to the victims'

families and friends. It can be traumatizing to have the death of their loved one listed in a database in this manner. It may also cause loved ones to be at a greater risk of being targeted if they were to speak out against the police department.

Other faults in this system are that the data or trends may be skewed due to the lack of police shootings reported by the police departments themselves, meaning that a ton of cases can remain hidden or unknown. Individual departments may only uncover certain cases that they want public for whatever reason, but may try to hide other shootings that may have been directly driven by discrimination, such as racism, sexism, or even prejudices against those with mental illnesses. Additionally, since the database gathers data from a variety of sources, there may be some overlap. There could be a news account about an “unidentified victim,” who may be logged twice into the database because there might be a social media post about the same person. I see that for some of the entries of victims, there are multiple sources for the information disclosed, but it is not the case for all of them.

Another fault that I have recently noticed is that yesterday on September 27, 2020, upon viewing the article, I copied and pasted the title into this document as “1,010 people have been shot and killed by police in the past year.” Today, which is September 28th, the title is “999 people have been shot and killed by police in the past year.” It seems that there are some inconsistencies in the database and maybe there were some errors in the system.

While this database can be useful for studying the trends in fatal police shootings, it is harmful to the people affected and their communities. While people

attempt to interpret and analyze the data given by The Washington Post, they may start developing certain biases towards certain groups of people, or try to justify in their heads these shootings. For example, one might try to back up the officers and reason that a person who was armed might have been attempting to harm others. However, it is difficult to judge a situation without actually witnessing it and being a part of it. I also feel like being able to filter and search through people's deaths is both dehumanizing and desensitizing. The article's title also implies that these individuals are just numbers, or data, which I personally do not like. It is also important to note that statistics can be manipulated to match people's arguments. Someone may look at the sheer numbers and mention how there are more white Americans shot and killed than Black Americans, without taking into account that the percentage of the population both of these groups make up, to support the argument that police brutality against minorities is not truly an issue. Thus, while developing and observing the data presented in The Washington Post's database, one must keep in mind its flaws and limitations.