

1 In reply to Jacob Bor, et al., “Police killings and their spillover effects on the mental health of
2 black Americans.”

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10 A recent study by Jacob Bor and colleagues in *The Lancet* draws a causal relationship between
11 exposure to police killings of unarmed blacks and worse mental health among black Americans.¹
12 We appreciate the effort to seek evidence of ways in which criminal justice disparities can
13 influence mental health, but are concerned that the methods could undermine an important
14 message.

15 The authors use data from Mapping Police Violence (MPV), which provides information about
16 known police killings – including whether the citizen was “allegedly armed” or “unarmed.”
17 However, in these data, police killings of citizens holding a toy weapon (e.g., BB gun, pellet gun,
18 or air rifle) are coded as unarmed. Likewise, citizens “alleged to be armed by the police, but
19 multiple independent witnesses maintain the person was unarmed,” are coded by MPV as having
20 been unarmed (see mappingpoliceviolence.org/aboutthedata). These are important caveats. Toy
21 guns are often difficult to distinguish from real guns (especially in a matter of split seconds),
22 which is why databases compiled by *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* are careful to not
23 label such cases as unarmed, but as specifically involving toy guns. Similarly, it is debatable
24 whether we should dismiss police accounts of events in favor of witness accounts, which are
25 often shaky.

26 We compared police shootings in the MPV database with multiple years of police shooting data
27 available from *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*, and found that MPV consistently
28 reported more shootings of unarmed black citizens (Table 1). We also compared fatal shootings
29 of black citizens whom MPV identified as unarmed, to the same incidents in *The Washington*
30 *Post’s* and *The Guardian’s* data between 2015-17 (Table 2). In total, we identified 110 such
31 shootings. Among them, there were 36 discrepancies – mostly due to MPV labeling those in
32 possession of toy guns as unarmed. Note, however, that in some instances, other databases coded

citizens as being in possession of a deadly weapon (e.g., an actual gun, knife, or vehicle). As but one example, MPV classified Freddie Blue, who was fatally shot in 2015, as unarmed. In *The Washington Post's* data, he was classified as armed with a gun; in *The Guardian's* data, unknown. According to local news coverage, Blue and three other men had been in a confrontation with police, and at least one of the men (it is unclear which) pointed a gun at the officers, prompting them to shoot.²

We make no claim that *The Washington Post* or *The Guardian's* data are 100% accurate. Indeed, others have been critical of these data as well.^{3,4} Yet, these simple exercises should raise a red flag. In short, the very liberal definition of “unarmed” used by MPV and by the authors likely overestimates the true number of unarmed shootings in the analysis. Additionally, no apparent statistical consideration is given to whether shootings are deemed justified or unjustified and how this may affect the public’s view of them. The study should be viewed in this light, with consideration that the mental health effects are potentially over-stated.

Healthcare disparity between black Americans and whites has long been known to occur. Only recently are the depths of this disparity beginning to be understood. It is vitally important to investigate this, address disparity and push for equality with the most accurate and robust data available.

References

- 1 Bor, J, Venkataramani, A, Williams, D, Tsai, A. Police killings and their spillover effects on the mental health of black Americans: a population-based, quasi-experimental study. *Lancet* 2018; Volume 0 , Issue 0.
- 2 Peebles, J. Man dies after being shot by Newton deputies. Atlanta Journal Constitution. 2015 Jul 12.
- 3 Klinger, DA, Slocum, LA. Critical assessment of an analysis of a journalistic compendium of citizens killed by police gunfire. *Criminology & Public Policy* (2017); **16**(1): 349-362.

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61 *civilians*. St. Augustine, FL: Contextual Press.
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Table 1. *Number of fatal police shootings of unarmed black citizens, 2015-2017, database comparison.*

	MPV ^a	<i>The Washington Post</i> ^b	<i>The Guardian</i> ^c
2015	54	38	40
2016	33	19	30
2017	34	20	—

^a Mapping Police Violence, www.mappingpoliceviolence.org/aboutthedata

^b https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2018/national/police-shootings-2018/?utm_term=.0dface654e50

^c *The Guardian* (stopped tracking police shootings after 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2015/jun/01/the-counted-police-killings-us-database>

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Table 2. *Citizens fatally shot by police whom MPV labeled unarmed, 2015-17 (N=36).*

Year	Name	WAPO Classification	Guardian Classification
2015	Leslie Sapp III	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Tiano Maton	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Bryan Day	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	La’vante Biggs	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Lamontez Jones	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Dominic Hutchinson	Toy weapon	Unknown
	Richard Perkins	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Freddie Blue	Gun	Unknown
	Leroy Browning	Gun	Unarmed
	Cornelius Brown	Unknown weapon	Other
	Denzel Brown	Undetermined	Unarmed
2016	Peter John	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Paul Gaston	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Kionte Spencer	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Arteair Porter, Jr.	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	India Beaty	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Robert Dentmond	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Dominique Silva	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Charlin Charles	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Lionel Gibson	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Sherman Evans	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Arthur Williams	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Tyre King	Toy weapon	Non-lethal firearm
	Roy Richards	Toy weapon	Gun
2017	Jerome Allen	Toy weapon	n/a
	Quanice Hayes	Toy weapon	n/a
	Chance Baker	Toy weapon	n/a
	Lorenzo Cruz	Toy weapon	n/a
	Christopher Wade	Toy weapon	n/a
	Aries Clark	Toy weapon	n/a
	Deaundre Phillips	Gun	n/a
	Jimmie Sanders	Gun	n/a
	Antonio Garcia, Jr.	Knife	n/a
	Dennis Plowden	Vehicle	n/a
	Herbert Gilbert	Undetermined	n/a
	Anthony Aquilar	Undetermined	n/a