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Critique 2

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**Critique of Police Shootings Investigation by The Washington Post**

The data-driven story, “[Fatal police shootings in 2021 set record since The Post began tracking, despite public outcry](https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2022/02/09/fatal-police-shootings-record-2021/)” published in The Washington Post, uses numbers to show why the story matters. This article, by Marisa Iati, Steven Rich and Jennifer Jenkins, emphasizes that the number of fatal police shootings —1,055 last year —was the highest it has been since at least 2015 in the United States. But the writers and sources make it clear that this number did not significantly spike. The writers are careful to add balance to their story, while still highlighting the importance of this data.

The Post has been keeping track of the number of fatal police shootings each year since 2015. I think it would be useful to mention how the investigative team gathered its data earlier in the story. I felt like I was left wondering how they found these numbers for too long. I would recommend they move this information from the middle of the story closer to the beginning. Knowing the team’s methodology adds credibility to the article.

The story links to The Post’s fatal police shootings [database](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/?itid=lb_police-reform-in-america_2), which is a much more comprehensive look at the numbers and is updated frequently. It includes a list of the names of victims, their age, the date of their death, if they had a mental illness, whether there was body cam footage and whether they were fleeing police. It also has a map of where these shootings have taken place, which is a great visual. It looks like there are more instances on the West Coast and in the eastern part of the country.

In the story, The Post explains that a large effort has been made to reduce the number of these shootings, including creating police partnerships with mental health experts and forming citizen review boards. Still, the number went up last year. On average, about 1,000 fatal police shootings happen each year. Last year’s number was up 3%. One source, who is a law professor and criminologist, explains that this increase is not incredibly significant. Rather, experts expected a number like this. Sources in this story include law professors, criminologists, data scientists and mathematicians.

The journalists wrote that the number of fatal police shootings in 2021 “could be explained by Poisson’s random variable, a principle of probability theory that holds that the number of independent, uncommon events in a large population will remain fairly stagnant absent major societal changes.” I can see why the writers chose to include this because it is a part of a data-driven story. But as the average reader, this statement alone does not mean much to me. I think it would be useful for the writers to elaborate on this or give a simpler example to further explain this theory. I also think graphics would be useful to tell this story. Since the number of shootings per year has remained relatively constant, a bar graph may not be the best option. However, I think a map showing where these shootings took place would be useful. Did they take place in major cities? Did they take place across the country? A map showing where the shootings from Jan. 1, 2021 to Dec. 31, 2021 occurred (like the one on the database) would have been useful to include in this story.

I am glad the writers looked further into the data and included the percentages of instances (such as domestic-disturbance calls and 911 calls) that led to fatal police shootings. It was also useful knowing what percentage of these shootings were caught on police body cam footage. The greatest number of these shootings were caught on film last year. Further, I am interested in how the number of police wearing these cameras has increased over the years. I think it would be useful to dive deeper into these numbers.

The writers mention that only 1% of these shootings included juveniles, but what overall age group was the most impacted? It appears they have this data, since it is included in the database. Therefore, I think a sentence explaining which age group was the most impacted last year would add context. The writers acknowledge that racial demographic data was incomplete and could not be analyzed at the time of writing this story. As the writers mention, this type of data analysis takes longer to complete. Thus, I will keep my eye out for any stories that may follow in the upcoming months.

While this story has great expert sources, I would have liked to hear voices from Americans personally impacted by fatal police shootings. The writers gave examples and linked to prior stories, but it would have been useful to include a quote or two in this story to add more human emotion. These types of quotes show people why they should care.

Because the number of fatal police shootings remained roughly the same, it shows that this issue is not getting worse and is not getting better. Still, I like that the story ends on a hopeful note. As the writers learned through interviews and research, the effects of recent policy changes may take years to become visible. As the story mentions, more than 400 bills were introduced in states last year to address violent police force. With more accountability on police departments, dramatic change could come soon.

Overall, I think the data in this article is important, especially because of the larger story behind the numbers. I do wish The Post used graphics, photos and personal stories more than they did. These additions would draw the reader in while also breaking up the story, which is text heavy. Regardless, it will be interesting to see what The Post learns over the next few years in terms of fatal police shooting trends.