

# In service of a racist system: Police killings undercounted by more than 50%

written by Gloria Verdieu  
October 9, 2021



Protesters in Baton Rouge, La., demand justice for Ronald Greene, who was killed by Louisiana State Police in 2019. His death was one of the many misreported by official sources.

The New York Times recently published an article entitled [“More Than Half of Police Killings Are Mislabeled.”](#) It reported the results of a study conducted by researchers at the University of Washington and published in The Lancet, a world-renowned medical journal that publishes articles that address urgent topics to initiate debate, put science into context and influence decision makers around the world.

[The study](#) compared the U.S. National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) to open-sourced, non-governmental databases, and scientifically analyzed tens of thousands of entries. It confirmed that police violence has been grossly underreported for at least four decades.

The findings present evidence that deaths at the hands of the police disproportionately impact people of color in general, and Black people in particular, due to systemic racism.

This study is a follow-up to [an earlier study](#) by Boston University’s School of Health and the University of Pennsylvania in June 2018, also published in The Lancet. That study argued that policing should be treated as a public health issue, forcing the entire system of recruitment and training to change.

Now some three years later, this extensive research shows again that police killings — whether in pursuit, in transit or in custody — continue to be a national public health crisis.

This has had devastating effects on Black communities, resulting in more violent clashes with police and other law enforcement agencies, as noted in [a presentation made by this author](#) at the “Ending Police Violence” shadow session at the 2018

American Public Health Association meeting in San Diego.

## **17,100 missing deaths**

The University of Washington study dives deeper into the issue of recording the names, ages, gender, race and ethnicity, location, date, year and time of death, various details leading up to death, and medical examiners' and coroners' reports on the cause of death. After retrieving data from the NVSS and three open-sourced, non-government data sources — the [Guardian's "The Counted,"](#) the [Washington Post's "Fatal Force"](#) and the ["Mapping Police Violence"](#) project — researchers estimate 30,800 deaths from police violence between 1980 and 2018. This represents 17,100 more deaths than reported by the NVSS.

During this period, the mortality rate due to police violence was highest among Black, non-Hispanic people, followed by Hispanic people of any race. Many of those deaths were either misclassified or not reported.

The New York Times gave examples of misclassified, improperly coded death certificates on NVSS reports, noting that pathologists have complained that law enforcement does not provide all relevant information and they are at times pressured to change their opinion.

The examples cited included Ronald Greene, who arrived dead at the hospital in 2019, bruised and bloodied, with two stun-gun prongs in his back. His death was ruled accidental and attributed to cardiac arrest. Louisiana State Police initially said Greene died on impact after crashing into a tree. The Union Parish coroner attributed Greene's death to a car crash and made no reference to police conflict.

Two years later, the 46-minute body cam video was released, showing that Greene was stunned, punched and placed in a chokehold by police. Greene's grieving mother said, "How he died is evil." The family filed an unlawful death lawsuit. This is

reflected in the [Fatal Encounters](#) open-source database.

## **Sickle cell trait excuse**

["Sickle cell trait: an unsound cause of death,"](#) published in the Lancet in August 2021, states, "Physicians deny justice to communities by providing medical cover for death at the hands of law enforcement officers and by perpetuating medical falsehoods to justify this practice." The article cites the recent case of George Floyd.

On May 25, 2020, an initial autopsy report about Floyd read, "Man dies after medical incident during police interaction." The report attributed his death to Floyd's history of heart disease, substance use, and the sickle cell trait.

The sickle cell trait is a genetic disorder that disproportionately affects African Americans. While it can cause serious health issues, the trait is often passed from parent to child with no symptoms.

It was the bravery of Darnella Frazier, the teen who filmed the incident with her cell phone for 10 minutes and uploaded it to Facebook, that got a murder conviction against Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin and a small measure of justice for George Floyd's family. Frazier's video showed that despite any underlying health issues, Floyd really died because Chauvin kneeled on his neck for 9 minutes and 29 seconds.

In a May 2021 article, ["How a Genetic Trait in Black People Can Give the Police Cover,"](#) the New York Times cited 47 cases where the sickle cell trait was referenced in autopsy reports, court filings and other public records in police custody deaths.

It details several cases where Black people were forcefully restrained, pepper sprayed or shocked with stun guns, and yet the presence of sickle cell was used to justify their deaths.

## **Underreporting masks racism**

Black people were killed at a higher rate than white people every year from 1980 to 2018. In 2019, Black people were killed at a rate 3.5 times higher than white people. Latinx and Indigenous people are killed disproportionately as well.

Of the three open-source data collection methods cited by the University of Washington study, The Guardian's "The Counted" had the lowest percentage of cases missing race or ethnic information and covered people killed by other law enforcement agencies besides police.

The Bureau of Justice and Statistics, a division of the U.S. Justice Department, actually considers open-source data collection methods preferable to government reporting systems due to underreporting by the NVSS.

Reporting fatal police violence accurately and creating a database that is transparent and open to the public is one way to expose the system for what it is and a step forward in gaining accountability for the crimes committed on a daily basis. This is just a step because, as the study acknowledges, the real solution is to eliminate the burden of police violence on Black and Brown people.

Police are not held accountable and their actions lack transparency. "Mapping Police Violence" reported that in 1,147 deaths, only 13 officers were charged with a crime.

The Lancet report states, "Police forces should exist to enforce laws that protect public safety, but throughout the USA's history, police have been used to enforce racist and exploitative social orders that endanger the safety of the most marginalized groups in society."

Some of the earliest examples of policing include the capture of runaway slaves, dismantling labor strikes and movements, and stopping riots, protests and other expressions of social outrage.

The police are highly militarized and escalate situations that could be resolved without violent interactions. They are trained to believe that any interaction can turn deadly, particularly in Black, Brown and other oppressed communities, and they react as such.

### **Capitalism relies on police violence**

But the fundamental issue goes much deeper than training. The role of police in capitalist society is to protect the property of the wealthy and enforce the rule of the rich over the workers and oppressed. Ultimately, the only way to root out police violence is to do away with the racist, for-profit system that relies on it.

There have been some trends that have decreased police killings temporarily in some cities, such as banning the shooting of non-violent offenders who are fleeing, high-speed chases in residential areas and shooting into moving cars.

But recent reform efforts to cut down fatal police violence, like banning chokeholds, mandating body cameras, training in de-escalation, diversifying police forces, and civilian police review and advisory boards have all failed. We know these efforts have failed because fatal police violence has remained the same or increased since 1990.

We need community control of the police, with the power to hire and fire. We need immediate practical measures like disarming and demilitarizing the police. Some may see this as too radical, but is it?

There are 19 countries where the regular police are unarmed, including Norway and Britain, where only select officers are armed. In 2019, no one died from police violence in Norway, and three people were recorded to have died from police violence in England and Wales between 2018 and 2019.

A better way of protecting, supporting and keeping our communities safe is possible.

Disarming the police is an urgent step that must be considered — otherwise you must realize that calling the police could result in the death of you or someone you care deeply about.

