

Policing the Police

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Tracking Killings by Police

Local police departments usually maintain at least some statistics on killings that involved their officers. We asked for this information from 110 departments.

Some agencies like Philadelphia (<https://www.phillypolice.com/ois/>) and Los Angeles (http://www.lapdonline.org/categorical_use_of_force) provide readily accessible synopses of killings. Other agencies provide this information upon request.

Five agencies did not provide us with any records: Michigan State Police, Florida Highway Patrol, Prince George's County Police Department, Kentucky State Police and Buffalo Police Department.

There are three repositories for national data on police killings, though all are deeply flawed.

- The FBI's supplementary homicide report (SHR). Email FBI spokesman Stephen Fischer at Stephen.Fischer@ic.fbi.gov for a copy.
- The CDC's National Vital Statistics System (NVSS) tracks data on death certificates. Here, you can see counts of deaths by "legal intervention" (make sure to exclude executions). Data and documentation available here: http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/mortality_methods.htm
- The Bureau of Justice Statistics also has information collected under the Death in Custody Reporting Program. New legislation that passed in late 2014 may make this data collection more robust (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/1447>).

The FBI's data is the most useful because it (sort of) allows linking to police departments. Here are some things to know:

- ORI Numbers
 - The FBI's data is organized around something called the ORI number.
 - This number represents the agency with geographic jurisdiction over the event.
 - For most information flowing into the data (crimes), this makes sense. However, it doesn't work well for police killings. What you want to know about homicides by police is the agency whose officer pulled the trigger. Unfortunately, that's not what you get.
 - For example, if a Baltimore City police officer pursued a suspect into Baltimore County and then killed him, the event would be recorded under Baltimore County's ORI number.
 - For many agencies, this is not a huge problem. However, it can get complicated, particularly in the cases of...
- Contract Cities

- In some cases, municipalities contract their police work to local sheriffs' departments.
- This means tallying up the number of police homicides under those sheriffs' department codes will result in an undercount. This is another quirk of the geographic nature of the FBI's data.
- For instance, in our analysis, well over half the killings by deputies of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department occurred in one of the agency's more than 40 contract cities.
- If we hadn't accounted for that, we could have reported that Compton police had some number of police shootings. But that's not true: Compton doesn't have a police department. It contracts the work to the LASD. Sadly, the FBI offers no way to determine this is the case.
- Wikipedia maintains a surprisingly accurate list of contract cities: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_contract_law_enforcement_municipalities_in_the_United_States. Of course, for anything you plan to publish, contact the cops to confirm.
- Inaccuracies and Missing Records
 - The FBI does not report into its own database of police killings. As of now, there are no national statistics I'm aware of that reflect killings by federal agents. The new legislation that passed late last year will force at least some federal reporting.
 - After a certain point, the FBI's data is set in stone and no edits are allowed. So if a department determines two years after submitting a report that a record was misclassified, it can't fix the record.
 - Several large states still do not report any information about killings by police to the FBI. They include: Florida, New York and Illinois. New York said they'd begin reporting in 2015, Illinois said possibly by 2017 and Florida said probably not. However, this may be moot under the new legislation.
 - For more detail than you could ever want on what's missing from the data, check out this report, released by BJS in March 2015: <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/ardpatr.pdf>