



FATAL FALSEHOODS:

Setting the Record Straight on Police Shootings

Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund Research Report | August 2024

Surveys suggest that the American public increasingly agrees with the persistent media narrative that fatal police shootings and use of excessive force are common, racist, and getting worse.

Activists and political leaders frequently refer to these fatal incidents and police use of force broadly as “police violence.” In 2021, then-Speaker of the US House of Representatives called “police brutality” an “epidemic.”¹

But the facts don’t support those claims. In reality, fatal police shootings and all uses of force are exceedingly rare, very limited, and overwhelmingly justified. The myths around police force and fatal shootings are both false and pernicious, yet pervasive.

This report seeks to set the record straight.

THE FACTS:

- Police rarely use force.
- When police use force, it is usually limited and proportional.
- Fatal police shootings are extremely uncommon.
- Unarmed fatal police shootings are both exceedingly rare and largely justified.
- Public perceptions around fatal police shootings and race are distorted.

PERCEPTION VS. REALITY

Vox

Police brutality is a public health crisis

Protesting during a pandemic is a risk. But so is the status quo of police violence.

June 2020²

AP

AP-NORC poll: Police violence remains high concern in U.S.

May 2021³

THE HILL

3 in 4 consider police violence against public a serious problem: survey

February 2023⁴

ABOUT THE LAW ENFORCEMENT LEGAL DEFENSE FUND (LELDF)

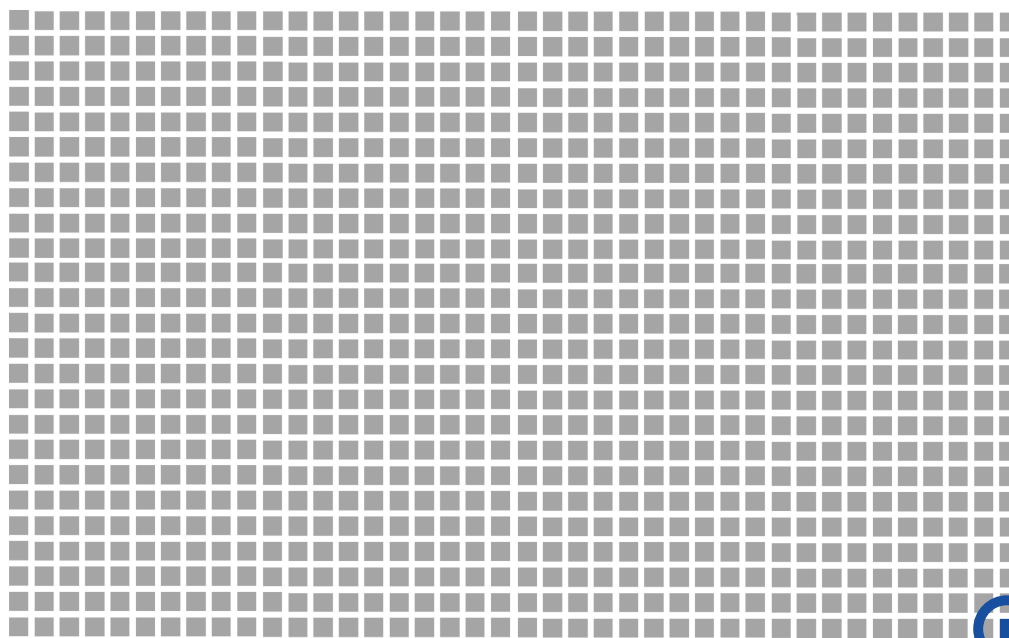
The Law Enforcement Legal Defense Fund (LELDF) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit dedicated to supporting and defending the law enforcement profession and those law enforcement officers who have devoted their lives to upholding the Constitution and serving the United States and its citizens while enforcing its laws. We also seek to educate the public about the many risks and threats to law enforcement personnel in order to build a more informed, respectful, and appreciative society.

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Police [use of force] is rare. When force is used officers most commonly rely on unarmed physical force and [non-lethal weapons]. Significant injuries are rare.

- Study by Wake Forest University (2018)

FIGURE 1.



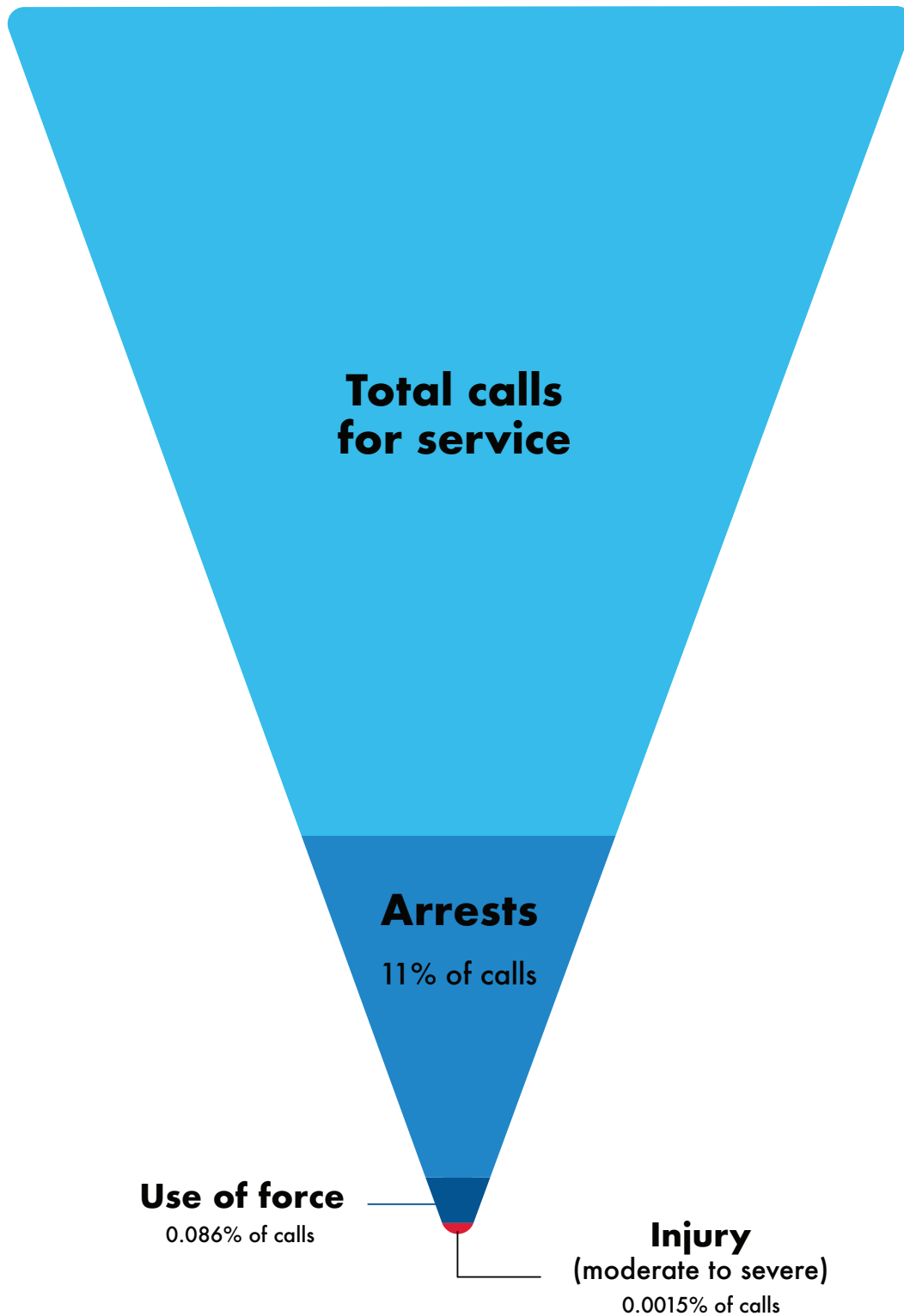
99.9%
of POLICE CALLS are
resolved peacefully.



Source: Wake Forest University study, 2018.

FIGURE 2.

Share of police calls that lead to arrests, use of force, and injuries



Source: Wake Forest University study, 2018.

Falsehoods Drive Public Misconceptions About Police Shootings

Police Violence:

- In 2021, 45% of Americans agreed that police violence against the public is an “extremely or very serious problem” — up from 32% in 2015. (AP NORC Poll)
- A 2023 poll of US Voters found that 75% believed police violence is a “very or somewhat serious problem.” (Morning Consult Poll)⁵

Racial Bias in Use of Force:

- In 2021, 56% of Americans said police are more likely to use deadly force against a black person than a white person. (AP NORC Poll)⁶
- In 2023, 62% of US Voters agreed that police violence against Black people is “widespread and common.” (Morning Consult Poll)

FIGURE 3. **Americans overestimate how many unarmed and total Blacks and whites are fatally shot by police each year**

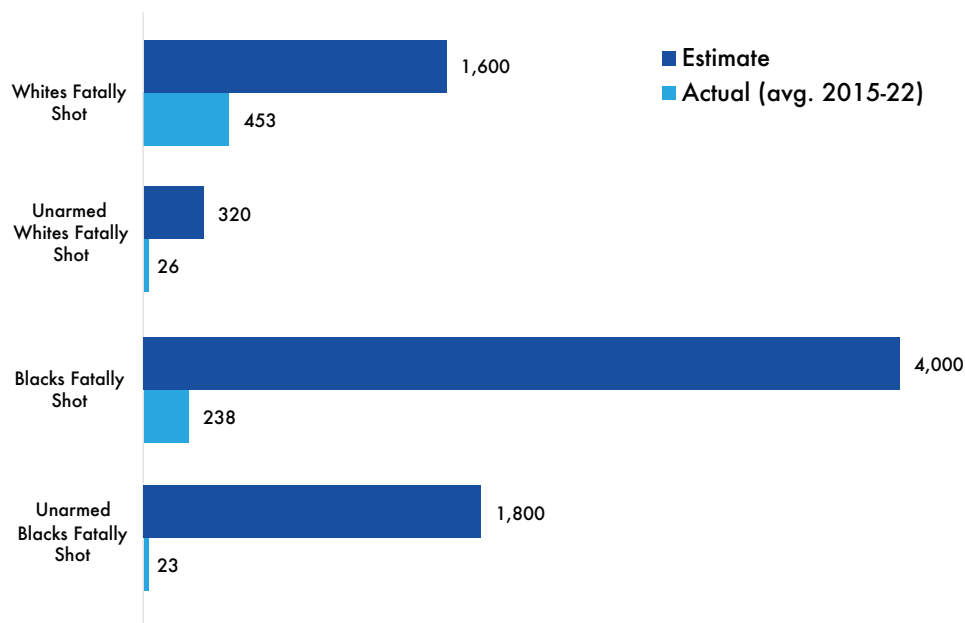
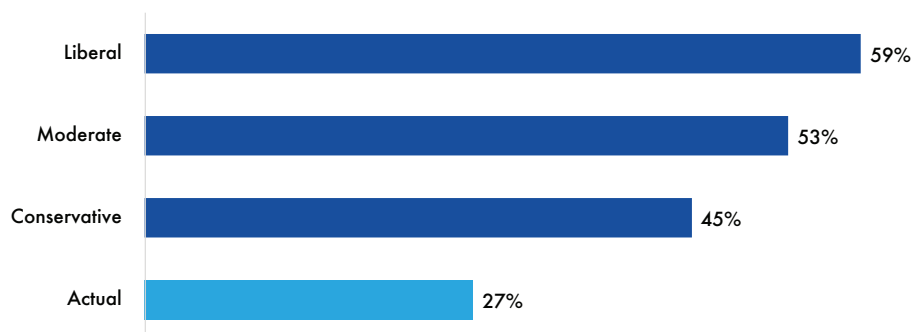


FIGURE 4. **Americans' estimates of share of Blacks fatally shot by police by political orientation**



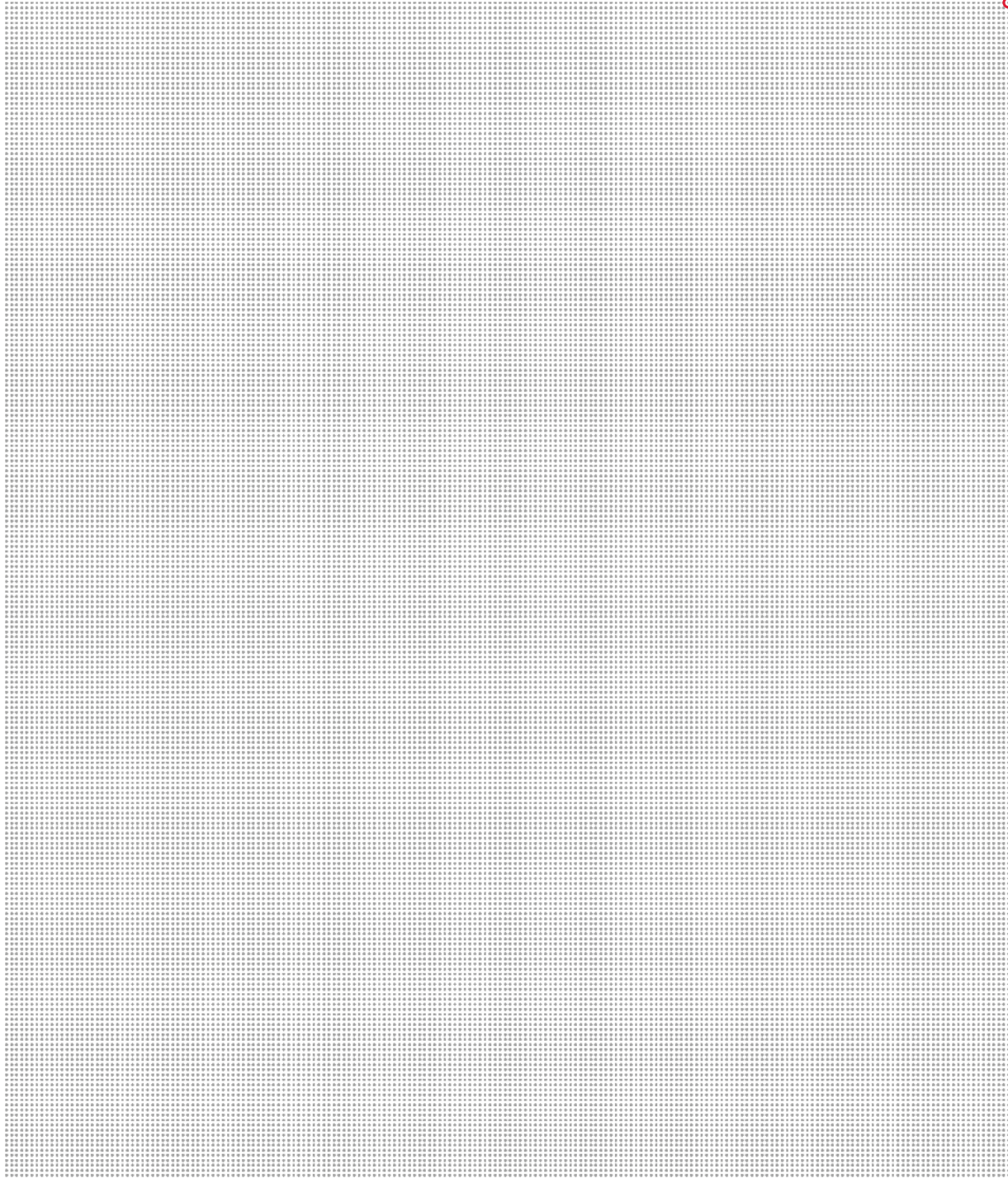
Source: Manhattan Institute Survey, 2023; Washington Post Fatal Force Database.

Fatal Police Shootings are Unlikely and Uncommon

Contrary to media portrayals and public perceptions, fatal police shootings are, in fact, incredibly rare. Out of the nearly 60 million police encounters with the public each year, only .003% result in a fatal or injurious shooting.⁷

FIGURE 5. **For every 56,000 police encounters...**

...there is ONE fatal shooting



Source: Bureau of Justice Statistics, Police-Public Contact Survey: 2015, 2018, & 2020.

Police Shootings and Use of Force Are Not Systemically Racist

Of those fatally shot by police between 2016 and 2022 whose race was identified by the Washington Post database, 51% were white – twice as many the share of Blacks killed (26.7%). While Blacks comprised a higher share of the total relative to the overall US population, fatal police shooting deaths are also skewed toward the young, males, and city-dwellers – the same demographics that are most likely to be both perpetrators and victims of violent crime.

A 2023 study by Johns Hopkins University researchers found that when adjusted for incident and victim characteristics, fatal police shootings were not racially disproportionate, and blacks were less likely to be killed than whites.⁸ In fact, according to a study by Seattle University, “Black subjects were less likely to be injured as compared to whites [during use of force incidents].”⁹

Further, numerous academic studies have demonstrated that white officers are just as or less likely to fatally shoot minorities than officers of color, suggesting racial bias doesn’t explain police shooting demographics.¹⁰

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Officers were no more or less likely to draw firearms on Black citizens than white citizens during use of force incidents.

–Study by University of Nebraska (2023)¹¹

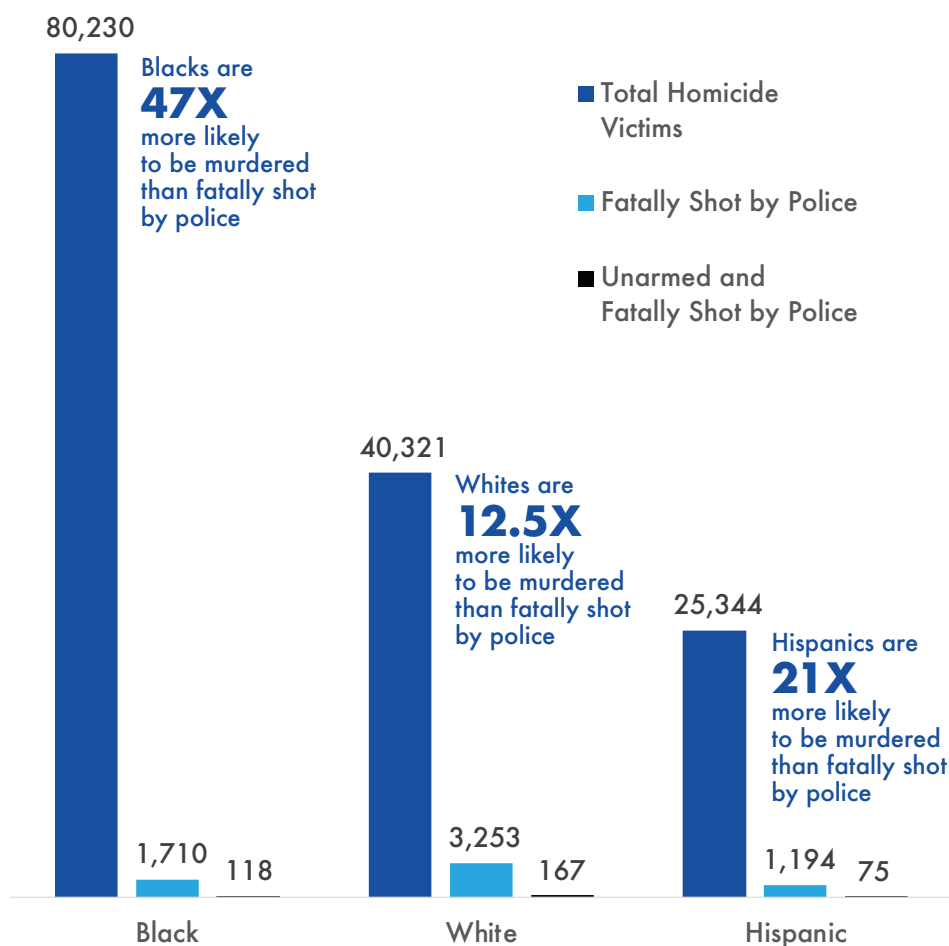
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On the most extreme use of force—officer-involved shootings—we find no racial differences either in the raw data or when contextual factors are taken into account.

–Harvard University study (2019)¹²

FIGURE 6.

Homicides vs. police shootings by race (2016-22)



Source: Washington Post Fatal Force Database, 2016-2022; CDC Homicides, 2016-2022.

Policing Shootings Are Overwhelmingly Justified

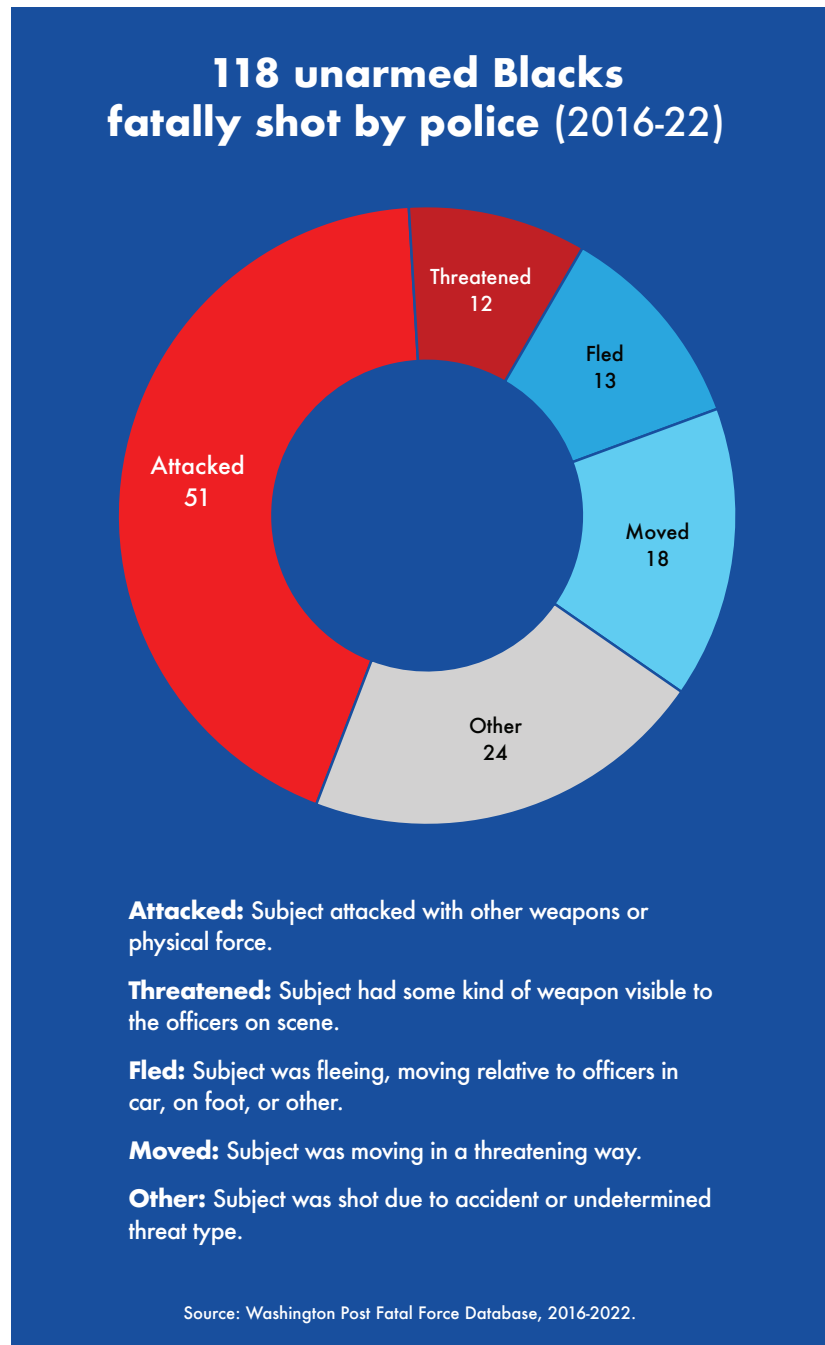
According to the Washington Post's Fatal Force database of the almost 7,100 persons fatally shot by law enforcement between 2016 and 2022, 86% were known to be armed with a weapon. Of the remainder, The Washington Post could not determine whether they were armed and identified only 5.4% as "unarmed." More the half of the "unarmed" civilians fatally shot were actively attacking law enforcement, immediately threatened to harm police or others, or pointed a threatening object at officers. For those whose armed status was not available, 55% posed a similar "threat" to law enforcement or others.

Bad Data Misinforms the Public About Police Shootings

The much cited but rarely vetted Washington Post Fatal Force database is filled with errors and incomplete information. Many of those classified as "unarmed" by the Washington Post were, in fact, armed immediately before the police fired. In a glaring instance, the Washington Post lists as "unarmed," Kyle Dail, who raised a firearm toward officers while resisting arrest – dropping it only milliseconds before he was shot by police in Dallas, Texas in 2022.¹³

In another case, the Washington Post identifies an Asian man, Channara Tom Pheap, as an "unarmed black male" despite news reports identifying him as "of Cambodian descent."¹⁴

FIGURE 7.



The database also counts the 2018 police killing of a 59-year old man, Virgil Wolford, in Columbus, Ohio in 2018. But Mr. Wolford, who stabbed two women, survived the shooting and was sentenced to 3 years in prison for his crime, dying of natural causes in 2023.

LELDF's analysis identified more than two dozen category errors or omissions just among subjects listed as "unarmed" – including incorrect racial categorization, name spellings, locations, threat levels, or weapon possession.

The reliability and accuracy of the data is further undermined by the Washington Post's failure to fully investigate details, preferring to list demographic or circumstance information as "unknown" or "undetermined" – leaving a false impression on the public.

Nearly 10% of those fatally shot by police between 2016 and 2022 are listed as of unknown race yet this study was able to establish nearly every subject's race via publicly available information. The Washington

Post classified 42 of those fatally shot by police as of unknown race in 2016, but 28 (67%) were identified as white in media reports, public databases, or government documents. Seven more were Hispanic, four were identified as Native American and only three as Black.¹⁵ These omissions exaggerate racial disparities in police shootings, contributing to the public's misconceptions as evidenced in polling data.

"KILLED BY POLICE"... YET SURVIVED AND SENT TO PRISON¹⁶

The Washington Post

April 30, 2018

Virgil Wolford

A 59-year-old man, armed with a gun, killed in Columbus, Ohio.

Departments involved: Columbus Police Department (Ohio)

Sources: WSYX

FIGURE 8.

"Unarmed" But Dangerous

How the Washington Post database misleads about fatal police shootings

<p>Mycael Johnson</p> <p>Pinned officer to the ground and grabbed gun</p> <p>Tallahassee, FL March 20, 2020</p> <p>During a vehicle pursuit of a stolen car, Johnson fled on foot and attempted to carjack two other motorists. After officers tased him to little effect, an officer physically tackled Johnson who pinned the officer to the ground and attempted to take the officer's weapon before he was shot.</p>	<p>Marzeus Scott</p> <p>Beat and knocked officer to the ground</p> <p>Blytheville, AR April 7, 2019</p> <p>Responding to a report of an assault on a store employee, an officer encountered Scott who ignored her commands to stop and then became aggressive, repeatedly striking her on the head and knocking her to the ground. He continued to approach her when she fired, fatally shooting Scott.</p>	<p>Mickel Lewis</p> <p>Charged at officer with hand in waistband (gun recovered nearby)</p> <p>Mojave, CA October 2, 2020</p> <p>While executing a traffic stop on a known violent sex offender who was thought to be armed, the deputy witnessed Lewis fleeing the vehicle then run back and reach for something near his seat before approaching the officer with his hand in his waistband. A firearm was recovered nearby.</p>
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Source: Washington Post Fatal Force Database, 2016-2022; local news reports and court documents.

Notes on Data & Sources:

The study's three primary datasets:

1. Washington Post's "Fatal Force" database. This study uses the raw datasets of fatal police involved shootings accessed via GitHub which includes categories (i.e. "threat type") absent from the public-facing online tool. Despite identifying erroneous incident details, the data is presented as reported (unless otherwise noted). Due to a lack of complete or accurate data for the 2015, 2023, and 2024 years, analysis covers only the 2016-2022 period. [Last Accessed June 27, 2024]
2. The Bureau of Justice Statistics' *Contacts Between Police and the Public* series (2015, 2018, and 2020 editions). The data shown is an average of total number of reported police-public contacts for US persons aged 16 and above, including traffic stops, arrests, and crime-reports.
3. Center for Disease Control Wonder Database. Homicide totals by race are drawn from "Multiple Cause of Death – Final" tables by race and Hispanic origin.

Endnotes

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Figure 1 & 2

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Figure 3 & 4

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Figure 5

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Figure 6

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Figure 7

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Figure 8

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