

Law Enforcement–Related Deaths in the US

“Justified Homicides” and Their Impacts on Victims’ Families

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For over a decade and a half, Project Censored researchers at Sonoma State University have been monitoring law enforcement–related deaths in the United States. In the most recent phase of this research, we interviewed members of fourteen families who had lost a loved one in a law enforcement incident. In this study, we let the families tell their stories in their own voices, and we report the commonalities in their trauma and mistreatment by law enforcement and the corporate media after the death of their loved ones.

Law enforcement agencies in the United States have been involved in excess of 600 deaths annually for at least the past fifteen years. In addition to the people dying on the street or in their homes through law enforcement–related activities, research shows that several hundred people a year die in local jails. In 2011, according to the Office of Justice Programs, 885 inmates died in the custody of local jails. Thirty-nine percent died within the first week of being jailed.¹ This number, combined with deaths on the outside, allows us to estimate that more than 1,500 people die annually in law enforcement–related circumstances, whether in custody or in the course of law enforcement actions in the victims’ communities. It is reasonable to assume that some portion of these deaths is attributable to officer mistakes, overreactions, or deliberate acts that result in death.

But almost always, despite obviously questionable behavior by law enforcement personnel, no charges are filed. Investigations of law en-

forcement-related deaths, either internally within departments or by outside agencies, nearly always rule that homicides are justified and followed departmental procedures.

It is extremely rare for police departments to rule a death as unjustified, or to charge an officer with neglect, manslaughter, or murder. One of these rare cases was the 2009 New Year's shooting of Oscar Grant by Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police officer Johannes Mehserle. Mehserle was convicted of involuntary manslaughter and received two years in prison. In a civil trial, Grant's mother, Wanda Johnson, and Grant's young daughter, Tatiana, received financial settlements from BART totaling \$2.8 million as a result of the shooting.

In 1998, Project Censored cosponsored a research study with the Stolen Lives Project, a group born out of the October 22nd Coalition.² Through funding from the San Francisco Foundation, Karen Saari, a legal researcher in Sonoma County, California, spent a good part of a year searching the newspaper databases LexisNexis and ProQuest at Sonoma State University for articles on law enforcement-related deaths. She was searching for police shootings and any situation reported in the newspapers where someone died in the presence of law enforcement officers. Besides gunshots, deaths included suicides, car accidents, shootings, drowning, and Taser use.

To our knowledge, this was the first time such a study had been attempted in the US. During the twelve-month period from October 1, 1997, to October 1, 1998, Saari found news stories on 694 deaths in the presence of law enforcement in the United States. Department of Justice figures at the time listed about 350 people killed by police in the previous year, so Saari's research showed a significantly larger rate of death among civilians in law enforcement incidents than was previously known at the time.

The newspaper deaths reported in 1997 show that eighty-one were related to excessive application of restraint techniques, and that ninety-one were reported to be suicides, although the ruling of suicide was questionable in a number of cases. Deaths occurred throughout the US, with California leading the nation.³

In 2011, Jim Fisher used Internet searches to identify 1,146 police shootings that year. Among these were news reports indicating that 607 people had died by police shooting. This was a slightly higher

rate of shooting deaths than had been reported in 1997–98 but did not include Taser, restraint deaths, and suicides. Fisher found that the vast majority of the people shot had been between the ages of twenty-five and forty-nine, a result similar to Saari’s report a decade earlier. In 2011, two victims of the police had been fifteen years of age, and one girl had been only sixteen. Fifty of the dead were armed with BB guns, pellet guns, or toy replica firearms.⁴

Project Censored sought to verify the numbers of law enforcement–related deaths in a more recent year. A team of Project Censored student researchers, including Greg Sewell, Rio Molina, Vanessa Pedro, and Jessica Clark, conducted a sample survey using Google, LexisNexis, and ProQuest for three months in 2013. They found fifty-two law enforcement–related deaths reported in US newspapers for May 2013, forty-nine deaths for August, and forty-seven for December. The total of 148 deaths in three months of 2013 suggests that as many as 600 civilians may have died in the hands of law enforcement officers over the course of 2013—numbers that are very similar to the 1997–98 and 2011 findings.

Prior research documents that the number of persons killed by local law enforcement officers in the United States that are reported in official sources does not match the number that are reported in the media. Determining the nature and reasons for this discrepancy requires putting together pieces of data from sources with divergent definitions and measurements of death by law enforcement.

Available statistics for the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) track justifiable homicide by law enforcement, which the FBI defines as “the killing of a felon by a law enforcement officer in the line of duty.” According to FBI data, justifiable homicides by law enforcement totaled 369, 367, and 393 deaths in 1997, 1998, and 2011, respectively.⁵ The FBI data for 2007–12 shows that justifiable homicides by law enforcement averaged 396 deaths per year.⁶ FBI data for 2013 is not yet available.

The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) provides data for 2003–09 on Arrest Related Deaths (ARD), including “homicide by law enforcement.” This is the most recent data published from the ARD data collection program, which uses a much more inclusive definition than the FBI’s justifiable homicides data. The ARD data “includes homi-

cides by law enforcement personnel as well as deaths attributed to suicide, intoxication, accidental injury, and natural causes.”⁷ Thus the ARD reports 4,813 total deaths for January 2003 to January 2009, of which 61.5 percent (2,931) were classified as homicide by law enforcement.⁸ The homicide victims were classified as 42 percent White, non-Hispanic; 32 percent Black, non-Hispanic; 20 percent Hispanic; and 7 percent “other” or “unknown.” Males accounted for 96 percent of homicides.⁹ Related data also shows that from 1980 to 2008, most such homicides were intraracial, with Cooper and Smith noting that “two-thirds involved police officers and felons of the same race.”¹⁰

WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

There are several hundred people who die annually during encounters with local law enforcement (or shortly thereafter in hospitals, as measured in one database). Variations across years and jurisdictions may be attributable to a variety of factors, including increased use of Tasers, and increases in the proportion of justifiable homicides by law enforcement that involved victims deemed mentally ill.¹¹ For example, Loftin et al. found that Supplemental Homicide Report data for justifiable homicides by police in 1976–98 differed significantly from National Vital Statistics Data on deaths at both the national and statewide levels. The authors concluded that both databases under-report justifiable homicides by police.¹²

Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) analyses of FBI data on justifiable homicides show that such killings declined from 1980 to the early 1990s, then rose again in the mid-1990s, declined till 2000, then rose slightly again. Although the data trends described above apply to both justifiable homicides by law enforcement and private citizens, the BJS report notably stated, “The number of justifiable homicides committed by police exceeded the number committed by citizens.”¹³

Unfortunately, there are notably different ways that law enforcement–related deaths are defined and measured, which makes comparisons across data sources, jurisdictions, and years problematic. In addition, there are missing data for some jurisdictions for some time periods.¹⁴

THE MILITARIZATION OF DOMESTIC LAW ENFORCEMENT

The social science literature has addressed these issues in a number of ways, especially by examining the process of militarization of law enforcement agencies in the United States. We see a transition from the deployment of police as individuals within a community-oriented process to an increase in the deployment of teams of Paramilitary Police Units (PPUs), most notably as SWAT (Special Weapons And Tactics) teams. This has been coupled with a transition to a more aggressive rather than community-oriented form of “cop culture,” fueled by media representations that support a “show balls” attitude where street-level police are portrayed as getting things done, not mired down by procedure and bureaucracy.

Researchers distinguish between militarism and militarization. *Militarism* describes an ideology, while *militarization* refers to the implementation of that ideology. At the core of militarism as an ideology is the belief that the threat of force or its actual use is, in the words of one prominent scholar on the issue of police militarization, “the most appropriate and efficacious means to solve problems.”¹⁵ Militarization is a *process* that police agencies undergo.¹⁶ This process began in the late 1970s and intensified during the 1980s, especially under the Reagan administration’s “war on drugs.”¹⁷ In 1981, an amendment to the 1878 Posse Comitatus Act (PCA) and the Cooperation Act of 1981 authorized the transfer of military training and weaponry to federal, state, and local police agencies, escalating the national trend in law enforcement to adopt military objectives, methods, and equipment.¹⁸ As Peter B. Kraska summarized, “[T]he normalization of PPU’s into routine police work, the patrol function, and in so-called ‘order enforcement campaigns,’ points to an enduring internal militarization not likely to recede anytime in the near future.”¹⁹

In 1992, under George H. W. Bush’s administration, the “weed and seed” initiative was implemented. This project was intended to “weed” out criminals and to “seed” social programs in blighted urban neighborhoods.²⁰ President Bush insisted that the drug war was to be fought house-to-house, neighborhood-by-neighborhood, and community-by-community, which laid the foundation for the militarization of law enforcement.²¹ The reality of this program was that

it expanded the budget of law enforcement and spent very little on social programs.

Then, as Stephen Hill and Randall Beger summarized,

Following the Oklahoma City bombing incident in 1995, President Bill Clinton proposed amending the PCA to allow the military to aid civilian authorities in investigations involving “weapons of mass destruction.” In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the Bush administration sought to gut the PCA to allow the military a wider role in disaster relief efforts. Stephen Muzzatti has also documented how, using “successful” drug task forces as a model, US law-enforcement agencies sought to create Joint Terrorism Task Forces (JTTFs) with the FBI throughout the 1990s. By the end of 2001, there were already close to 100 such units. Thus, in Muzzatti’s opinion, rather than initiating the process of police militarization, the “War on Terrorism” has “normalized and accelerated” it.²²

A survey of law enforcement agencies conducted in the 1990s about the creation of paramilitary-style units discovered that over 89 percent of the responding agencies with city populations over 50,000 citizens had at least one or more paramilitary police units. This same survey found that 70 percent of the responding agencies with city populations of fewer than 50,000 citizens also had at least one or more paramilitary police units.²³ In March 2014, the *Economist* reported that federal grants, made possible through the war on drugs and more recently the “war on terror,” provided funds for the purchase of heavy weaponry used by paramilitary police units. “Between 2002 and 2011 the Department of Homeland Security disbursed \$35 billion in grants to state and local police,” the article revealed.²⁴ According to the Associated Press, the US Department of Defense provided military surplus equipment, including 165 mine-resistant ambush-protected vehicles (or MRAPs), to nearly 13,000 law enforcement agencies across the country that participate in what is known as the 1033 Program. This program permits the transfer of military surplus to law enforcement agencies. In fiscal year 2012, \$546 million worth of property was transferred this way.²⁵

Beyond funding and equipment for paramilitary police units, police academies emphasize weapons and training. According to Matthew J. Hickman's 2005 study of 626 state and local law enforcement academies that offer basic training, "the greatest amount of required instruction time was in firearms skills (median sixty hours)."²⁶ When combined with forty-four hours of self-defense training, along with twelve hours on nonlethal weapons training, officer weapons and self-defense training comprised around 16 percent of total academy training hours.²⁷

Jennifer Hunt and Peter K. Manning observed that, within law enforcement circles, it was a much graver error for a street cop to use too little force and to begin developing a reputation among fellow officers as a shaky officer than to engage in excessive force and be told by colleagues to calm down. When officers do not use enough force they are subject to reprimand, gossip, and avoidance in the police subculture. Using excessive force may establish an officer's status as a street cop who does real police work rather than as an inside desk man.²⁸

Research has documented that law enforcement officers typically hold shared beliefs about the importance of aggressiveness and selectivity in the conduct of their professional duties. Police culture research shows that officers hold positive attitudes toward aggressive stops of cars and "checking out people," as well as favorable attitudes toward selective enforcement of laws (e.g., assigning felonies a higher priority).²⁹

The dangers associated with law enforcement work often prompt officers to distance themselves from citizens, whom many officers orient to as threats to their safety. The coercive authority that officers possess also separates them from the public. The cultural prescriptions of suspiciousness, and maintaining an edge over citizens by creating, displaying, and maintaining their authority, all serve to further divide police and the members of the communities they supposedly serve and protect.³⁰ Officers who are socially isolated from citizens, and who develop strong loyalties to the fellow officers on whom they rely for protection, often develop an "us vs. them" attitude toward citizens. The group culture among officers and the mechanisms used to cope with the strains of the occupation, are related to the use of coercion over citizens—that is, it is the culture for officers to "show balls"³¹ on the street during encounters with citizens.³²

JUSTIFYING USE OF FORCE

Legal justification for the use of force is most frequent when law enforcement officers deem suspects to be resistant, when citizen or officer safety is threatened, in cases of increased suspect culpability, and when making arrests.³³ “When the encounter is officer-initiated (i.e., proactive),” one scholar suggested, “officers may be quicker to assert their authority and to do it more forcefully, perhaps because police legitimacy is lower than when the officer is invited or called on.”³⁴ A final factor helps explain variation across different agencies in the use of force: “Findings suggest that the use of force over citizens is a function of officers’ varying commitments to the traditional culture of policing.”³⁵

Criminology researchers have found that newspaper articles employ various strategies of symbolic communication to construct images and mobilize meanings that legitimize police violence.³⁶ Daryl Meeks observed that “urban policing has been assisted by pejorative media representations of the urban underclass, which serve to increase the fear of urban crime while exacerbating the stereotyping and social labeling of the urban underclass as an undeserving, dysfunctional, and non-contributing group of the American social structure.”³⁷

John Thompson defined “expurgation of the other” as the symbolic construction of scapegoats who must be resisted or purged.³⁸ Along these lines, news articles typically portray deadly force victims or perpetrators as evil, strange, or threatening manifest expurgation.³⁹ Police officers and officials allegedly call upon such images when concocting “cover stories” for police homicides.⁴⁰ One specific type of expurgation—reference to prior criminal history—merits special designation because it is a core feature of “cop vigilante” narratives but marginal to self-defense justifications because police shooters are rarely aware of victims’ criminal pasts.⁴¹

Research on police officers has noted the negative attitudes that police hold toward citizens,⁴² and of officers’ distrust of the citizens they police.⁴³ In addition, officers have historically not believed that those outside the policing profession would assist them in performing their duties, and even if “outsiders” did try to assist, they would not be of any real help.⁴⁴

In sum, the traditional view of police culture posits that officers



should, almost uniformly, hold strongly unfavorable views of both citizens and supervisors, show disdain and resentment toward procedural guidelines, reject all roles except that which involves fighting crime, and value aggressive patrolling tactics and selectivity in performing their law enforcement duties.

Mainstream newspapers periodically document and problematize the inability or unwillingness of police and judicial agencies to hold police accountable for killing civilians.⁴⁵ Absent from these investigations is a discussion of how these same newspapers often normalize, obscure, and rationalize police violence. The victims of police homicide are generally not presented in the same sympathetic manner as are most murder victims.⁴⁶ The use of crime frames raises the specter of the predatory criminal, a vilified and racialized media icon.⁴⁷ Patterns of expurgation and reactive/passive and active constructions suggest that news stories generally present police killings as the logical consequences of victims' lawless or troubled behavior.⁴⁸

In 2001, B. Keith Payne performed a set of two experiments showing how race affected respondents' perceptions of whether an object was a harmless tool or a dangerous weapon.⁴⁹ The experiments re-

vealed that research subjects made reflex associations between black male faces and guns. The first experiment showed that, when time was unlimited, participants identified guns faster when primed with black faces compared with white faces. While the first experiment demonstrated a racial bias in reaction times, the second showed that the bias was replicated when participants were forced to respond rapidly: when primed with a black face, participants more frequently misidentified a harmless item—such as a nonthreatening hand tool—as a dangerous handgun.

GIVING VOICE TO VICTIMS' FAMILIES

Based on the hypothesis that changes in police behavior would likely reduce the number of law enforcement–related deaths in the United States, we decided to interview the families of people who had died in law enforcement–related incidents. Our research team interviewed fourteen individuals who were immediate family members of people who died in law enforcement–related incidents in northern California between 2000 and 2010. At least one year had passed between the date of the death of their loved one and the date of the interview. Interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis and comparison. All the names of the interviewees and the victims are to remain anonymous to protect the families' privacies. Researchers used a standardized interview guide with thirty-four questions and were trained in sensitive interview techniques by a professional post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) counselor. The research methods for this study were approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Rights of Human Subjects at Sonoma State University.

What follows is a brief outline of the key facts, as reported by family members, for the fourteen cases, as well as the families' opinions on the death of their loved ones. In all fourteen cases, the investigating police departments ruled the deaths justifiable homicide. In case #9, a narcotics officer was indicted by the grand jury but was found innocent in a court trial. All the family members interviewed strongly believe that police overreacted and that their loved one should not have been killed under the circumstances.

CASE #1. *White male, age 29, San Anselmo, prior history of mental illness, in-home traumatic episode, victim charges police with small steak knife, shot to death.*

INTERVIEWEE #1: "I think [the police officer] acted hastily. . . . The cop that did it shouldn't have a gun. . . . He is the problem."

CASE #2. *Black male, age 19, high school senior, Hayward, shot in back of head while running away from Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) police, no record of mental illness, no weapons present.*

INTERVIEWEE #2: "The police and the media just said . . . the officer felt threatened by my son and had to shoot him. Very few newspapers changed their story or apologized when they found out my son was shot in the back of the head."

CASE #3. *Black male, age 30, Rohnert Park, prior drug use, shot in back running from police after car chase, no record of mental illness, no weapons present.*

INTERVIEWEE #3: "He was running from the police. . . . They shot him in the back . . . murdered by the police."

CASE #4. *Black male, age 27, Oakland, prior drug use and sales, no history of mental illness, shot in back running from police, threw away handgun before being shot, financial settlement to family from civil trial.*

INTERVIEWEE #4: "He had to run because he had a pistol on him. The police chased him. He ran around the corner and threw away the gun. The cop saw him throw away the gun and I guess decided it was OK to go ahead and shoot. He was shot two or three times in the back."

CASE #5. *Black male, age 23, San Francisco, bipolar and depressed, confrontation in movie theater over smoking, shot forty-eight times by nine officers, no weapons, financial settlement to family from civil trial.*

INTERVIEWEE #5: “[The police] evacuated all the theater . . . and they got in and shot him forty-eight times. [The cops] posted stuff on my son’s website. I checked the IP address and it came from the police station. [They wrote,] who cares about your dead baboon on welfare?”

CASE #6. *Black male, age 73, Ukiah, long history of mental illness, local psych unit asked police to pick him up so he could take his medications, runs to his apartment chased by police dog, dog attacks him and he responds with sharp object, shot several times in back and side by police.*

INTERVIEWEE #6: “In my opinion he was murdered.”

CASE #7. *Black male, age 30, Rohnert Park, self-employed rapper, prior arrests for marijuana and passing counterfeit money, no recorded mental illness, ran from police after traffic stop, shot in back, no weapons present.*

INTERVIEWEE #7: “He ran [from the car after a stop] and was shot immediately in the back. And then he was dead. He and the officer that shot him . . . had gone to school together and played basketball together.”

CASE #8. *White male, age 39, Petaluma, prior depression and minor drug use, not taking his medications, traumatic episode called 911 himself, rampaging in his parents’ home, Tasered by police three times and dies, no weapons present.*

INTERVIEWEE #8: “The police . . . are supposed to protect you and take care of you, and we were following the rules.”

CASE #9. *Latino male, age 40, San Jose, prior felon, no history of mental illness, mistaken identity car chase by undercover narcotics officers, runs from car and shot in back by officer, bleeds to death after delayed medical care, no weapons present, financial settlement to family after civil suit.*

INTERVIEWEE #9: “My uncle happens to drive by a stakeout and he fits the description of a Mexican guy with a mustache . . . in a blue van. The undercover narcotic officers gave chase . . . my uncle didn’t know who they were. . . . He ends up on a one-way street and stops his car, and starts to run away. My uncle jumps a fence and the officer shoots him in the middle of the back. They let him lay there for eleven minutes bleeding. . . . Finally they let the ambulance in and he dies on the way to the hospital.”

CASE #10. *Black male, age 16, 127 lbs., Sebastopol, no prior criminal record, depressed, traumatic episode in van parked in family driveway with small carving knife, pepper sprayed and shot six times by county sheriff, financial settlement to family from civil trial.*

INTERVIEWEE #10: “The officer was highly reactive and he didn’t assess the situation, he immediately jumped into plan of action and that escalated the situation rather than contain[ed] it. Both officers said they feared for their life, yet these officers were both more than twice the weight of my 127 lb. son.”

CASE #11. *Latino male, age 34, San Jose, prior drug use, no history of mental illness, single officer confrontation 3:00 AM in front of his children’s and ex-partner’s home, Tasered by officer, physical struggle, shot four times, no weapons present.*

INTERVIEWEE # 11: “His autopsy report showed that he had been hit four times with bullets through his left side. He was unarmed. The police said they are trained to stop a threat. And I said, Well my god if this officer felt threatened what about a shot to the leg or something . . . and he responded, No we are trained to shoot center space in the body. You know if you can’t shoot center space you won’t be a police officer.”

CASE #12. *White male, age 24, Santa Rosa, mentally ill ward of the state, schizophrenic, in and out of care facilities since age 14, stopped taking medication and had psychotic incident in his home shared by three men, picked up small kitchen knife and is Tasered and then shot by police four times, small financial settlement from civil suit.*

INTERVIEWEE #12: “There are probably a great many combat veterans in the police . . . you have been taught to kill. They could have stepped back. The first thing they could have done is not make him come out of his room. Anyone who knows anything about mental patients who are off their meds—just get them somewhere quiet and alone.”

CASE #13. *White-Korean male, age 30, Santa Rosa, mental illness (bipolar and PTSD), fired gun because he was afraid of intruders in his attic, taken outside by police, ran at officers shot, no weapon in possession at time of shooting.*

INTERVIEWEE #13: “They kept shouting orders at him, I believe there were six officers, they approached in formation all of them with their guns aimed at him, and to someone in this mental state it was extremely threatening way to approach him. [They had him on the ground] and kept shouting confusing orders to him, turn your head to the right, turn your head to the left, then he jumped up . . . and they shot him with a rifle in the chest, right in the heart. None of this would have happened, all they had to do was say we are here to help, we understand you are hearing intruders, do you mind if we take a look?”

CASE #14. *Black male, double amputee in wheelchair, age 61, and his son, age 21, Oakland, police arrive seeking proof of vaccination for dog that was reported to have bitten someone in the home, father killed with one shot to heart, son killed with thirteen shots, officer dies (family says from friendly fire), police claim son had a shotgun, mother says no gun in the house, tape recording hidden by police for six years revealed cooperative son and no shotgun blast.*

INTERVIEWEE #14: "I think the reason officers do what they do is because they can. It is just like any human reaction that if there are not consequences, then you have a green light. . . . They don't pay lawsuits, the taxpayers do. They seldom get fired for wrongdoing. So basically what they do is with impunity because they know the odds of any negative impact coming back to them . . . is negligible."

We asked the families to tell us about their loved ones' backgrounds, education levels, favorite memories, and what they were like as a person. We thought this was important to give a human face to the deceased. Each person killed by the police had family and close relationships. Some had mental illness, but were under care and working to improve. Some had prior run-ins with the law. By asking these questions, we learned about aspects of the victims' personalities and humanity that were missing from the official police and news accounts of their deaths.

The deceased were described in the following terms: creative, artistic, loving, warm, compassionate, nice, trying to figure out where he belonged in the world, having a sense of humor, loved motorcycle riding, delightful, good hearted, happy, friendly, happy-go-lucky, helpful to a lot of people, reachable, fun, outgoing, passionate, kind, sweet, gentle, intelligent, spiritual, loved weightlifting, leader, good with people, popular, great smile, and very caring.

Some favorite memories were described as follows: fishing on the San Francisco Bay; he taught me how to drive a stick shift; he could impersonate anyone; we liked to walk together down Stage Street; he was wonderful on the stage, acting; we played basketball a lot as kids, he loved baseball but would only bat—never played outfield; he made my heart smile; he was very happy when he got a baby brother; bobbing up and down in the water free and happy; and my favorite memory is being hugged by him.

Most of the families complained that the police lied to them after the death of their family member and that the media backed up the police. In most cases, immediate family members were isolated from each other, as they were taken to the police station. Families were kept from knowing that their loved one was dead. Questioning by police was designed to build a negative case against the deceased.

INTERVIEWEE #1: “It is always the same, the police . . . just band together.”

INTERVIEWEE #2: “There was a knock on the door, and a parent’s worst nightmare came true to us. The media and the official report said he had been shot in the chest. When we got to the hospital we found out he had been shot in the back. The doctors told my wife and me that he had very little possibilities of survival, and [in] the case he did survive, it would most likely be in a vegetative state. After three agonizing days, we decided to disconnect him from life support.”

INTERVIEWEE #3: “They didn’t want to give me any information . . . when you get a phone call in the middle of the night that somebody’s just died, you kind of want some information. Then the newspaper wrote like he was terrible, a gang member. He was murdered by the police.”

INTERVIEWEE #4: “Well, from the beginning we felt the police were covering up something that happened. . . . They said they shot him because he pointed a gun at them—that never happened [he was shot in the back]. Channel 2 came out and my aunt asked me to do the interview . . . they needed to put a report on TV. They [just] want you to see the face of someone on TV in pain.”

INTERVIEWEE #5: “When I got to the hospital, three officers came to me and [said], ‘You need to follow us to the homicide department. Your son died at the scene.’ So they interrogated me for five hours. Then what I didn’t know was his girlfriend was in the room next to mine. So, when they finally let me go—didn’t offer me a ride cab or nothing. I call his girlfriend, and said, ‘Your man is dead,’ and I heard her screaming ‘mother fuckers,’ . . . all along she was asking (the police) ‘How is he,’ ‘Tell me he is OK,’ and they kept saying, ‘He is just fine.’ So they were interrogating both of us to see whatever kind of dirt they could find on him to discredit his case. They lied to her for five hours about his condition.”

INTERVIEWEE #6: “I don’t think [the media] focused on the police

investigation. There was nothing on the fact that this was a criminal act by the police. It was there and then it was gone.”

INTERVIEWEE #7: “I think it was in the paper for one day, and then it was gone. It just disappeared like it never happened.”

INTERVIEWEE #8: “We witnessed what happened (about 10:00 PM) and we were put in a patrol car, no shoes, my husband was still in his pajamas. . . . It seemed like hours before they took him out of the house in an ambulance. They wouldn’t tell us if he was alive or dead. We were taken into the police office and told not to speak to each other about the incident. At 3:00 AM, the Petaluma police came in and told us he had passed away.”

INTERVIEWEE #9: “The [police chief] lied to us. One of the detectives said something negative about my cousin, and the chief said they should take the guy off the case, but that never happened. They interviewed both my cousins, separated them out. The newspaper called my grandma saying, ‘We heard your son got shot,’ my grandma calls my mom all hysterical. . . . First the media was trying to dehumanize him like they do . . . when someone gets shot by a cop. Later as the facts came out, the media kind of changed its mind on things, but a lot of the time they were just there for the story.”

INTERVIEWEE #10: “I started towards the van (to see my son) and the police pushed me away towards the house. They detained us in this room, I looked out the window and his body was on the driveway with a blue sheet and a white sheet over it, his hand was sticking out (with handcuff on). I was really disturbed. I couldn’t go to see (my son). They held us for an hour then took us to Santa Rosa Police Department. Our house was searched, our computers were seized, our home was photographed, wastebaskets searched, vitamins placed in a row on the counter and photographed. We were treated really unfairly. The police investigation was very biased. In our case, the Santa Rosa police conducted an investigation of the Sonoma County sheriffs (who shot our son), but the sheriff’s office was investigating another case (at the same time) for the Santa Rosa police.”

INTERVIEWEE #11: “[My mother, my cousin, and I] went down to the police station to find out what happened. We were immediately separated and not allowed to talk to anyone. We were put into little rooms and left for hours (3:00 AM to 10:00 AM). We kept asking, Is he OK? They responded he was in the hospital with shots in his arm. My sister was at home and they announced his death on the news. [The police] were withholding the fact that he had died because they needed us to talk to them. The officer came in and told me to get off the phone, and I exploded saying I am not getting off the fucking phone, you know that the father of my children had been shot and killed by you guys.”

INTERVIEWEE #12 did not respond to this question.

INTERVIEWEE #13: “The police took my daughter-in-law and her kids to the police station and questioned them for hours, including my two-year-old and ten-year-old grandchildren. I didn’t know any of this until the police came to my door the next day. They said, ‘Are you aware your son had an altercation with the police last night?’ He continued, ‘Well, there is no easy way to say this, but your son was killed,’ and they then just started asking me questions about our relatives’ names, addresses, and phone numbers and any information they could get from me. . . . Some of the things the media wrote right, and some definitely were wrong. They didn’t come to check with the family about the facts. So I wasn’t happy with the news coverage.”

INTERVIEWEE #14: “I drove home and there were 8 to 10 police cars around the house. They would not tell me what had happened. One said, ‘I will take you downtown and you will be told there.’ They put me in a room by myself for a half hour before anyone came in to tell me what happened. My youngest son was in the house and he was taken down to the police station and interrogated as well. They wouldn’t let us back in the house until 2:00 to 3:00 AM the next day. It was all over the news, and the police lied about having to shoot our dog because it was running loose in the house. That dog was always chained.

“It was a media circus for a week. They could have cared less about my husband and son. The only reason the media was interested in

this case at all was because it was the first time an officer had died in a really long time.”

Certainly, the sudden death of a loved one is a very traumatic event for anyone. However, adding in isolation, interrogations, and lies will undoubtedly magnify the trauma. These families carry a deep-seated anger toward the police or other law enforcement officers, not only for killing their loved ones but also for what they see as gross mistreatment by authorities after the event. Not only do they understand that after a law enforcement–related death police immediately circle the wagons and go into protective mode, but they also see the media as complicit in accepting press releases from the police unquestioningly and conducting little in the way of investigative reporting.

Unfortunately, cases like Oscar Grant and our fourteen interviews continue to emerge in northern California, and the nation and the police seemingly always rule the death “justified homicide.”

In March 2014, San Francisco police shot to death a twenty-eight-year-old black man in a security guard uniform wearing a Taser. Police claim he started to pull his Taser, and they shot him fourteen times. Family members and community question how police could have mistaken a Taser for a gun.⁵⁰

In February 2014, an off-duty San Antonio Police Department officer shot twenty-three-year-old Marquis Jones in the back. The off-duty officer was working security at a local restaurant. After a minor accident involving the car in which Jones was a passenger, he turned and walked away from a confrontation between the officer and a friend. The officer pushed aside the friend and fatally shot Jones in the back, without warning. Jones’s parents are now suing the city of San Antonio, the officer, and the owners of the restaurant.⁵¹

MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE ANDY LOPEZ CASE

In November 2013, investigative reporter Dennis Bernstein described the death of Andy Lopez at the hands of a Sonoma County sheriff:

On October 22, at 3:14 in the afternoon, 13-year-old Andy Lopez was walking to a friend’s house on the outskirts of Santa Rosa,

California, to return the friend's toy rifle, when two Sonoma County sheriff deputies drove up behind him in a marked police car and say they mistook the replica AK-47 for a real gun. Sheriff's Deputy Erick Gelhaus, a training officer with 24 years' experience in the department, later told investigators that he shouted at the boy to drop his "gun" and that when Lopez turned, Gelhaus feared for his life and opened fire, riddling the eighth-grader with seven bullets from a 9 mm Smith & Wesson handgun. According to the other deputy, who was driving the car and who did not open fire, the shooting was over in just a few seconds, even before he had time to move from behind the wheel and take cover behind his door.⁵²

Part of the tragic irony of this shooting was that it occurred on October 22nd, the very day that the national Coalition to Stop Police Brutality, Repression and the Criminalization of a Generation uses to encourage awareness of police homicides.

In a twenty-eight-minute independent "Groundswell for Peace" production, Elaine B. Holtz, host of the long-running program *Women's Spaces*, discussed the findings from an independent autopsy with Frank Sainz of the Justice Coalition for Andy Lopez (JCAL). The autopsy showed a pattern eight shots, with seven hitting Lopez, including a shot into his side through his heart. At no point did Lopez actually face the sheriff; he was shot in the side, wrist, and back. Frank Sainz went on to say that "incompetent deputy Sheriff Erick Gelhaus made a mistake. . . . He is [a] loose cannon, who is known to pull his weapon."⁵³

The Andy Lopez shooting created a firestorm of protest, marches, demonstrations, and other arrests for several months in the Santa Rosa area. Many people could not understand how the sheriff did not determine that a thirteen-year-old boy in shorts was just a neighborhood kid out for a walk. The day after the shooting the *Santa Rosa Press Democrat* published a photo provided by the Sonoma County Sheriff's Department, comparing Lopez's plastic toy gun to a real AK-47. This comparison led many readers to immediately assume that the sheriff had good grounds to shoot Lopez. Letters to the editor went so far as to blame his parents for letting him play with a look-alike weapon. *The Press Democrat* did not publish images of a youthful

Andy Lopez depicting him as a smiling, thirteen-year old who bore no resemblance to an armed adult criminal.

A Sonoma State University (SSU) student research team in the Spring 2014 Investigative Sociology class examined the extent to which local media coverage of the Andy Lopez shooting influenced public opinion regarding the case. They also explored if the media's portrayal of the shooting was adequate, fair, or complete. The SSU students concluded in their report, "After reviewing a variety of media source depictions of the Andy Lopez shooting and speaking to community members about their perceptions of the case, we have concluded that the local media's coverage of the event has influenced the community to believe the shooting was justified."⁵⁴ On July 7, 2014, the Sonoma County District Attorney's Office announced at the end of their five-month investigation it would not file criminal charges against deputy Gelhaus for the Lopez shooting.⁵⁵

EXTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY AS ONE POTENTIAL SOLUTION

It is cases like Lopez's and others listed above that remind us that it is unlikely that all of these law enforcement-related deaths are justified. As interviewee #10 stated, "If there are one hundred police fatalities, statistics will tell you that (all) hundred wouldn't be justified. . . . If every single police fatality is justified, can justice prevail?" Interviewee #10 also questioned the validity of police agencies investigating each other, instead of an external community review process.

The question becomes what can be done to help families find justice in these tragic cases?

The Spring 2014 SSU Investigative Sociology research team also wrote about how the city of Davis, California, has a unique method to investigate police-related issues. Davis uses an independent police auditor and ombudsperson to review and investigate police behavior.

Bob Aaronson is the independent police auditor for the City of Davis, working directly for the mayor. Aaronson's responsibilities include taking and reviewing police department citizen complaints, as well as interacting with community members and organizations. In an interview, Aaronson explained that his work benefits both the police department and the community it serves. The different experi-

ences of community members and police officers lead to misunderstandings. In his role as an independent auditor, Aronson is able to bridge this gap by explaining to officers how they are being perceived, and by helping the community to understand the duties of the police.

Aaronson also stated that his job provides external accountability, which he believes is a benefit to both the department and community. Aaronson suggested that establishing a civilian review board or other community oversight could benefit both the community and the police department. He believes that police departments want to do the best job that they can and that they appreciate community feedback that helps them do a better job. Aaronson also stated that if civilian oversight is properly administered, it has a tendency to reduce the number of lawsuits filed against police departments in law enforcement–related actions.

CONCLUSION

The best available evidence shows that more than 1,500 people die every year as a result of law enforcement engagements. At that rate, law enforcement related deaths are neither unusual nor trivial. They constitute a major social problem. However, the public is poorly informed about the scope of this social problem for two basic reasons. First, official investigations of law enforcement–related deaths nearly always determine that those deaths were justifiable homicides. Second, news accounts of law enforcement–related deaths typically emphasize official law enforcement perspectives, while they vilify the victims and marginalize the perspectives of the victims’ families.

The national push toward militarized police with homeland security oversight is certainly not reducing this death rate. Long-term racism continues to show abuses affecting people of color to greater degrees than white people. The culture of policing tends to reward aggressive behavior and diminish efforts to mitigate shooting deaths. And families of law enforcement–related death victims are mistreated and abused by police departments and the corporate media.

The hiring of an independent police auditor by the City of Davis is one step in the right direction, but much more is needed. We propose that the widespread development of democratic citizen involvement in community policing is essential to addressing this problem. This means that

local community members, politicians, and police departments need to seek real citizen oversight, with paid independent staff who can research and review police policies and behaviors. Community policing would help to minimize the circle-the-wagons syndrome that is characteristic in the aftermath of many law enforcement–related deaths.

We also recommend a comprehensive review of police training, which must put greater emphasis on the use of nonlethal interventions and non-aggressive practices, especially in mental health cases. Given the testimony presented above, mental health and social service support for the families of victims of law enforcement–related deaths is an important social justice need for people already suffering serious trauma.

We propose that news organizations employ their own ombudsperson who can operate like university professors with tenure, to undertake in-depth investigations in cases such as Andy Lopez’s, where the evidence calls into question any official judgment of justifiable homicide by law enforcement. In those instances, news organizations’ ombudspersons should work in cooperation with community police review boards in order to assure full transparency in the review of law enforcement actions and policies, and to encourage that law enforcement departments make policy changes and take corrective actions to retrain, or to remove from service, officers found to be unjustifiably aggressive or violent.

In the long run, these proposals promise to save cities money by reducing lawsuits, and, more importantly, they promise to save lives by encouraging law enforcement officers and agencies to act in ways that protect community members, and that hold them accountable when they do not.

The authors wish to acknowledge research assistance by Sonoma State University students Rio Molina, Vanessa Pedro, Jessica Clark, Tara Kostan, Alejandro Agua, and Jesus Vasquez (2013–14), and Amelia Albertini, Reham Ariqat, Veronica Bowers, Sandra Campos, Samantha Burchard, Sabrina Clark, Angelica Contreras, Alora Fowler, Kristin Laney, Ryan Larkin, Adam Lesh, Chris McManus, Rebecca Newsome, Adrienne Mead, Angela Pak, Blanca Rios, Chris Riske, Joe Risko, Ronni Poole, Jameka Rothschild, Steven Ruthford, Ryan Stevens, Lindsey Tanner, Lesley Tiffany-Brown, Josh Travers, Garret West, Chelsea Wilson, and Aragon Wyatt (2009–10).

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CENSORED 2015

INSPIRING WE THE PEOPLE

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Andy Lee Roth, Mickey Huff
with **Project Censored**

Foreword by
Ralph Nader

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Khalil Bendib



Seven Stories Press
New York • Oakland

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Seven Stories Press
140 Watts Street
New York, NY 10013
www.sevenstories.com

ISBN 978-1-60980-565-4 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-60980-566-1 (electronic)

ISSN 1074-5998

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Book design by Jon Gilbert

Printed in the USA