

Data on when police use weapons is lacking

By Max Ehrenfreund, Washington Post

Since Michael Brown's death in Ferguson, Mo. on Aug. 9, police have shot and killed people who were apparently unarmed in Los Angeles; San Jose; Victorville; and South Salt Lake, Utah. For two days, police in New Orleans did not make public the fact that an officer had shot a man in the head. He is expected to survive the injury.

News reports of officer-involved shootings are fairly regular across the country, but there are no national, comprehensive statistics on these incidents, so it is impossible to say how frequently they happen. Information about those struck by police bullets is also unavailable – whether they are unarmed or carrying a weapon, criminals or innocent bystanders, black or white. Reliable data would make it easier for citizens to know when officers are acting recklessly, and for police departments to develop methods of avoiding the use of lethal force.

The FBI collects data from police departments on all kinds of crimes, including hate crimes violence against police officers, but the bureau is not required to compile statistics on officer-involved shootings. Data from the state of New York shows that the targets of police gunfire are disproportionately black, which would be consistent with psychological experiments suggesting that in dangerous situations, people are more likely to shoot at black people than at white people.

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