

Throughout Trial Over George Floyd's Death, Killings by Police Mount

Since testimony in Derek Chauvin's trial began on March 29, more than three people a day have died at the hands of law enforcement.



By John Eligon and Shawn Hubler

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MINNEAPOLIS — Just seven hours before prosecutors opened their case against Derek Chauvin, a former Minneapolis police officer charged with murdering George Floyd, a Chicago officer chased down a 13-year-old boy in a West Side alley and fatally shot him as he turned with his hands up.

One day later, at a hotel in Jacksonville, Fla., officers fatally shot a 32-year-old man, who, the police say, grabbed one of their Tasers. The day after that, as an eyewitness to Mr. Floyd's death broke down in a Minneapolis courtroom while recounting what he saw, a 40-year-old mentally ill man who said he was being harassed by voices was killed in Claremont, N.H., in a shootout with the state police.

On every day that followed, all the way through the close of testimony, another person was killed by the police somewhere in the United States.

The trial has forced a traumatized country to relive the gruesome death of Mr. Floyd beneath Mr. Chauvin's knee. But even as Americans continue to process that case — and anxiously wait for a verdict — new cases of people killed by the police mount unabated.

Since testimony began on March 29, at least 64 people have died at the hands of law enforcement nationwide, with Black and Latino people representing more than half of the dead. As of Saturday, the average was more than three killings a day.

The deaths, culled by The New York Times from gun violence databases, news media accounts and law enforcement releases, offer a snapshot of policing in America in this moment. They testify not only to the danger and desperation that police officers confront daily, but also to the split-second choices and missteps by members of law enforcement that can escalate workaday arrests into fatalities.



Katie Wright, Mr. Wright's mother, speaking at a vigil in Minneapolis. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



A memorial for George Floyd outside Cup Foods. Joshua Rashaad McFadden for The New York Times

They are the result of domestic violence calls, traffic stops gone awry, standoffs and chases. The victims often behave erratically, some suffering from mental illness, and the sight of anything resembling a weapon causes things to escalate quickly.

And their fallout has been wrenchingly familiar, from the graphic videos that so often emerge to the protests that so often descend into scuffles between law enforcement and demonstrators on streets filled with tear gas. Just as one community confronts one killing, another happens.

Across the spectrum, from community activists to law enforcement personnel, there is emotional and mental exhaustion — and the feeling that the nation cannot get this right.

“How many more losses must we mourn?” Miski Noor, the co-executive director of the Minneapolis-based activist group Black Visions, said in a statement after the killing of Daunte Wright, 20, during a recent traffic stop in Brooklyn Center, Minn.

The pain of George Floyd’s death “is still scarred into our minds and yet history continues to repeat itself,” the statement continued. “Our community has reached its breaking point.”

This past week the mayor of Chicago called for calm as “excruciating” body camera footage was released in the police killing of the 13-year-old, Adam Toledo. The shaky video shows a police officer, responding to a call of shots fired, chasing a boy with what appears to be a gun down an alley at night in a predominantly Latino neighborhood.

“Stop right now!” the officer screams while cursing. “Hands. Show me your hands. Drop it. Drop it.” A single shot fells the boy as he turns, lifting his hands.



Activists went to Millennium Park in Chicago after video footage of Adam Toledo's death was released. Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New York Times



Mr. Wright's name was added to the memorial outside of Cup Foods. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Other recent lethal force incidents have rocked communities large and small: Michael Leon Hughes, 32, a Black man shot to death on March 30 after, the police say, he used a Taser on a Jacksonville police officer responding to a domestic dispute in a motel; Iremamber Sykap, 16, a Pacific Islander killed on April 5 as he fled from the Honolulu police in a stolen Honda Civic; and Anthony Thompson Jr., 17, a Black teenager in Knoxville, Tenn., killed by the police on April 12 in a high school bathroom after reports that a student had brought a gun onto campus.

All of those killings and many more occurred as testimony in the Minneapolis trial unfolded, though few attracted as much national attention as the shooting of Mr. Wright less than 10 miles from the courthouse where Mr. Chauvin stood trial. Protests erupted in Brooklyn Center after a veteran police officer fatally shot Mr. Wright, saying she mistook her gun for her Taser, as he attempted to flee during a traffic stop.

Abigail Cerra, a Minneapolis civil rights lawyer and a member of the Minneapolis Police Conduct Oversight Commission, said it was unclear why the officers stopped him for an expired registration, an issue for many drivers in the state during the coronavirus pandemic.

But two aspects of the case, she said, were infuriatingly familiar: that Mr. Wright was Black, and that the police tasked with delivering him safely to the courts, where violations of the law are supposed to be adjudicated, effectively delivered a death sentence.

"It's just another example of a nothing offense escalated to lethality," Ms. Cerra said.



Protesters in Brooklyn Center were illuminated by a flash bang grenade. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times



A Minneapolis memorial to Black people killed in police custody Joshua Rashaad McFadden for The New York Times

Though many of these killings have a familiar ring, it is unfair to blame them all on law enforcement, said Patrick Yoes, a retired sheriff's office captain and president of the national Fraternal Order of Police.

"In a lot of cities it has to do with people feeling hopeless," he said. "It's poverty, it's a failing education system. It's all of these things that are vitally important to stability of a community."

That instability often places officers in situations in which they confront individuals who may be dangerous and noncompliant, he said. Part of the reason society has been unable to prevent deadly encounters between law enforcement and the community is that some people are unwilling to discuss the real challenges of crime that officers sometimes encounter, he said.

"There's just so many factors that people have already made up their minds and they think that law enforcement is based off of race," said Mr. Yoes, who is white.

Federal and state laws generally hold that officers are justified in using lethal force as long as they have a "reasonable" fear of "imminent" injury or death for themselves or another person. And jurors tend not to second-guess what might be "reasonable" force in the moment.

Of the 64 fatal encounters compiled by The Times for the past three weeks, at least 42 involved people accused of wielding firearms. More than a dozen involved confrontations with people who were mentally ill or in the throes of a breakdown. And at least 10 arose as the police responded to reports of domestic violence.



A memorial in the lobby of the Chicago Avenue Fire Arts Center at George Floyd Square in Minneapolis. Aaron Nesheim for The New York Times



Air fresheners at protests in Brooklyn Center this week. Mr. Wright told his mother that officers initiated the traffic stop because of a hanging air freshener. Victor J. Blue for The New York Times

Some dispute the notion that danger, rather than bias, is more likely to drive a law enforcement officer's reactions.

"What I see sometimes is in these encounters with people of color, there is a different aggression," said Ron Johnson, a retired Missouri State Highway Patrol captain who led the police response in Ferguson, Mo., after the police killing of Michael Brown in 2014.

"This adrenaline starts going out of the roof," added Mr. Johnson, who is Black. "And why? It's because we don't have these experiences and these understandings of each other. And in some cases, it's about humanity. We don't see them in the same human way that we see ourselves."

Since at least 2013, with a slight dip because of the pandemic, about 1,100 people have been killed each year by law enforcement officers, according to databases compiled by Mapping Police Violence, a research and advocacy group that examines all such killings, including non-gun-related deaths such as Mr. Floyd's. The Washington Post, whose numbers are limited to police shootings, reflect a similarly flat trend line.

Nearly all of the victims since March 29 have been men, with Black or Latino people substantially overrepresented — a pattern that reflects broader criminal justice research. And most were under 30. Four were teenagers.

Philip Stinson, a professor in the criminal justice program at Bowling Green State University who studies civilian killings by members of law enforcement, said the most striking aspect of the statistics on lethal police force is how little the numbers have changed in the decade or two since researchers began to comprehensively track them.

Even as cellphone videos and body cameras make it harder to hide human error and abuses of authority by law enforcement — and even as social media amplifies public outrage — only about 1.1 percent of officers who kill civilians are charged with murder or manslaughter, Dr. Stinson said.



Brooklyn Center protesters with portraits of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Elijah McClain, Ahmaud Arbery and Mr. Wright. Aaron Nesheim for The New York Times



Visiting a Black Lives Matter mural in West St. Paul, Minn. Joshua Rashaad McFadden for The New York Times

Since the beginning of 2005, he said, 140 nonfederal sworn law enforcement officers — such as police officers, deputy sheriffs and state troopers — have been arrested on charges of murder or manslaughter resulting from an on-duty shooting. Of those, 44 have been convicted of a crime resulting from the incident, in most cases for a lesser offense.

That could be because many of the shootings are legally justified, or also, as Dr. Stinson believes, because the legal system and laws themselves are overly deferential to the police. That deference, he added, protects the status quo in the more than 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country.

“All law enforcement is local,” he said. “Culture eats policy, as the saying goes, and we have a police subculture whose core elements in many places include a fear of Black people.”

Dr. Stinson cited the now-infamous traffic stop of a uniformed Army medic who was held at gunpoint and doused with pepper spray by the police in Windsor, Va., a rural town near Norfolk. The encounter, which occurred in December, was brought to light this month after Caron Nazario, a second lieutenant in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, filed a federal lawsuit.

Body camera footage shows members of the Windsor Police Department threatening and attacking Lieutenant Nazario, who is Black and Latino, after stopping him because he had not yet put permanent license plates on his new Chevrolet Tahoe.

The footage underscores the extent to which police culture has resisted change in much of the country, Dr. Stinson said.

“We only know about this one because he has a lawyer, they filed a civil lawsuit and they were able to get recordings they could release,” he said.



Protesters outside of the Brooklyn Center police station. Aaron Nesheim for The New York Times



Activists in Millennium Park in Chicago. Carlos Javier Ortiz for The New York Times

For many victims of police violence and their families, however, there is no video evidence to rely on.

Daly City, Calif., police officers were not wearing body cameras when they got into a struggle with Roger Allen, 44, as he sat in a car idled with a flat tire on April 7. The officers say that Mr. Allen had what appeared to be a gun on his lap, according to Stephen M. Wagstaffe, the San Mateo County district attorney, who is investigating the case. It turned out to be a pellet gun, but an officer fired a fatal bullet to Mr. Allen's chest during the fracas.

Now Talika Fletcher, 30, said she was struggling to come to terms with the fact that her older brother, who was like a father figure, had joined the grim tally of Black men who died at the hands of law enforcement.

"I never thought in a million years that my brother would be a hashtag," she said.

She has little faith that the dynamic between Black men and law enforcement will be any better once her 14-month-old son, Prince, grows up.

"The cycle," she said, "it's not going change."

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