



Up to half of people shot dead by US police may have untreated mental illness, report estimates

Michael McCarthy

Seattle

Between a quarter and a half of people shot dead by the police in the United States had an untreated mental illness, a new report has estimated. "Given the prevalence of mental illness in police shootings, reducing encounters between on-duty law enforcement and individuals with the most severe psychiatric diseases may represent the single most immediate, practical strategy for reducing fatal police shootings in the United States," the report concluded.¹

The use of deadly force by police has become a major topic of debate in the US after a spate of shootings, caught on cell phone videos by bystanders and posted on the internet, have shown police firing on people, some of whom were unarmed or appeared to pose no immediate threat to officers.

The new report was prepared by the Treatment Advocacy Center, a non-profit organization that advocates for improved treatment and social services for people with persistent psychiatric illnesses, such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. Doris A Fuller, the center's chief of research and public affairs, was the report's lead author.

The exact number of people with mental illness who are killed by police in the US is unknown, the report said, in part because currently no federal database reliably collects all information about the use of deadly force by law enforcement agencies. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's fatal injury reports, part of the national vital statistics system, is, for example, based entirely on local death certificates; and while medical examiners may note that a death was the result of a law enforcement encounter, this information does not have to be provided, the report said.

The role of mental illness in police shootings has been "rendered virtually invisible" by the failure of the government to collect such data, the report said. "We can learn the average prenatal litter size of a feral cat in America but not the number of civilians killed during encounters with law enforcement," the report said.

Lacking reliable government sources, the report's authors turned to independent efforts, including investigations by the

Washington Post and the *Guardian* that found that mental illness was a factor in a quarter of deadly police shootings; reports from the state of Nevada, which found mental illness was a factor in 54% of such deaths; and studies from abroad, including Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, which found that between a third and a half of lethal encounters with law enforcement involved citizens with mental health conditions.

The report said that after the advent of effective psychiatric treatments in the 1950s a policy of "deinstitutionalization" was adopted in the US that led to moving people with mental illnesses out of public psychiatric hospitals and into the community. However, because the community centers that were supposed to provide psychiatric care to these patients were not built in sufficient numbers, hundreds of thousands of people with schizophrenia and severe bipolar disorder remained on the streets without adequate treatment, the report said. These people often engaged in behavior that led to police calls, the report noted. "When officers respond, the symptoms of psychosis, paranoia, and/or suicidal thinking make these subjects less predictable and the threat they pose more difficult to assess," the report said.

In addition to calling for a reliable national system to report the use of deadly force by law enforcement that would include information about the role of psychiatric illnesses in such encounters, the report called for more restrictive deadly force policies. It also called for use of "co-responder teams" that pair specially trained officers with mental health professionals on callouts that involve psychiatric emergencies, an increase in the number of hospital beds for acute and chronic psychiatric treatment, and adequate services for people living in the community with psychiatric illness.

1 Treatment Advocacy Center. Overlooked in the undercounted: the role of mental illness in fatal law enforcement encounters. Dec 2015. <http://tacreports.org/overlooked-undercounted>.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2015;351:h6784

© BMJ Publishing Group Ltd 2015