

Special Advance Fact Sheet:

Deaths of People of Color By Law Enforcement Are Severely Under-Counted

Overview and Background

Beginning in early 2021, the Raza Database Project,¹ a team of volunteer researchers, journalists, family members of Latinos killed by police, and activists came together to investigate a long-suspected undercount of the deaths of Latinos² and other people of color by or in the custody of law enforcement. The Project's Director, Roberto "Dr. Cintli" Rodríguez, himself a survivor of police abuse, began his inquiry into the subject in 2016 by comparing well-known Hispanic surnames with the names of individuals reported in the "White," "Other," and "Unknown" categories of national databases of police killings that were created following the shooting of Michael Brown in 2014. His initial inquiry concluded that deaths of Latino and Indigenous people at the hands of police were under-counted in widely reported national databases by a quarter to one-third. He also called attention to media narratives that virtually ignored the killings of Latinos by law enforcement, even in Southern California, the largest Hispanic media market in the country.³

UnidosUS has been working with Raza Database Project researchers because, as an advocate for proposed reforms such as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act,⁴ the organization believes that effective policies to address law enforcement abuse rest on accurate statistics and media coverage. In the absence of an official, standardized, and transparent federal database system to collect, analyze, and publish data on people killed by law enforcement, a number of private entities have stepped in to try to fill the void.⁵ However, given limited resources, each of these data sets (as well as comparisons between them) has limitations:

- The kinds of incidents covered vary; some are limited only to police shootings, while others cover all deaths while in the custody of law enforcement.
- Some databases only cover specific years.
- Hispanic/Latino, Indigenous, and Asian and Pacific Islander people are not counted in a uniform way.
- None of the databases attempts to distinguish between justifiable vs. unjustifiable deaths, which is supposed to be the function of the judicial system; although with very few exceptions, most deaths in police custody never become the subject of judicial proceedings.

- The racial/ethnic identity of some unknown number of people dying in police custody, as well as the circumstances of these deaths, falls into the category of “information withheld by police,” often for lengthy and indeterminate periods.
- Perhaps most importantly, race/ethnicity typically is first observed and recorded by law enforcement; in the absence of standardized definitions, many Latinos and other people of color appear to be counted in “White” or “Other” categories, and discerning race/ethnicity often requires additional research, including reviewing news media, social media, or direct reports by victims’ families.

Civil rights advocates understandably focus on disproportionate killings by law enforcement of racial/ethnic minorities. But the data also reveal that all Americans, including Whites, are at risk of being killed by police at rates Project researchers believe no other developed country in the world even approximates.

Analysis

To address some of these limitations and produce a more accurate count of Latinos killed by or who died in police custody, Project researchers conducted several analyses. The first aggregated all names reported in national databases of all deaths by or in the custody of police from the year 2000 through May 9, 2021, eliminating duplicate names based on standard social science practices.⁶ The result of that analysis is in Appendix I. Table 1, below, reports results from 2014 through early May 2021.

Table 1: Aggregated, Unadjusted Count

Deaths in Presence of/Killings by Police
By Race/Ethnicity 2014–May 9, 2021

Year	Total	Latino/ Hispanic	Asian/Pac Islander	Black/African American	Native American	Middle Eastern ⁷	White	Other	Unknown
2014	1,869	322	31	492	20	2	854	148	-
2015	2,149	309	30	550	26	7	1,077	144	6
2016	1,998	268	27	511	29	3	989	163	8
2017	2,075	314	20	521	33	6	930	234	17
2018	2,108	325	35	504	29	1	883	307	24
2019	2,073	276	40	536	19	4	819	357	22
2020	2,134	267	23	507	17	4	766	529	21
2021	679	58	11	145	5	-	218	213	29
All	15,085	2,139	217	3,766	178	27	6,536	2,095	127

The aggregated analysis reveals several key findings:

- There are many more people killed by or while in custody of police than even well-informed observers may realize. For example, followers of the Washington Post’s highly regarded Fatal Force Report website (which is limited to police shootings) were advised in 2020 that 967 people were shot and killed by the police.⁸ The Project’s aggregated analysis shows that more than twice that number—2,134—were killed by or died in the custody of police during that year.

- Similarly, the number of Latinos killed by or who died in police custody nearly doubles when fully accounted for. While the Washington Post reports that 1,058 Latinos were shot and killed by police over the 2015–2020 period, that number nearly doubles to 1,759 when all databases and all causes of death in police custody are included.

The team also aggregated and analyzed the causes of death reported in national databases. While shootings are by far the most common cause of death for all people in police custody, the data also show large numbers of people who died due to pepper spray, physical restraint (as a jury found killed George Floyd), tasing, in or by a vehicle, and a suspiciously high number of people who purportedly experienced a “medical emergency” while in custody (see Appendix III).

Raza Database Project researchers conducted additional analyses to identify Latinos whose deaths may have been recorded in the “White,” “Other,” or “Unknown” categories in national databases. Their initial analysis, reported in Appendix II, ran the names of all people reported killed by or in the custody of law enforcement from 2000 through May 9, 2021, against the 2010 Decennial Census of Population and Housing: Surname datasets.⁹ The results of that additional analysis for 2014 through May 9, 2021, are reported in Table 2, below.

Table 2: Aggregated Adjusted Count

Deaths in Presence of/Killings by Police
By Race/Ethnicity, 2014-May 9, 2021

Year	Total	Latino/ Hispanic	Asian/Pac Islander	Black/African American	Native American	Middle Eastern ¹⁰	White	Other	Unknown
2014	1,869	343	194	431	25	1	760	113	-
2015	2,149	346	170	491	39	1	992	104	6
2016	1,998	311	182	438	41	2	905	112	7
2017	2,075	388	187	456	45	3	837	148	11
2018	2,108	411	181	434	52	1	784	222	22
2019	2,073	342	233	465	33	2	729	248	21
2020	2,134	406	195	456	28	3	675	353	18
2021	679	106	85	134	9	-	189	133	23
All	15,085	2,653	1,427	3,305	272	13	5,871	1,433	108

Notwithstanding the limitations of surnames as a proxy for race/ethnicity,¹¹ the analysis produces significant findings. After aggregating across all databases and adjusting for surname:

- The number of Latinos killed by or in the custody of police over the 2014–present period increased from 2,139 to 2,653, suggesting that such deaths are under-reported in commonly cited databases by about one-quarter.
- Deaths of Asian/Pacific Islanders increased by 1,210, or more than six times, in the adjusted analysis.

- Reported deaths of Native American people grew to 272 from 178 in the adjusted analysis, an increase of more than 50%.
- The largest arithmetic change came from a reduction in the “White” category from 6,536 to 5,871, a decrease of 665 deaths.
- The “Other” category also decreased significantly, by 662, a reduction of nearly one-third.¹²

This analysis permits several other conclusions. First, people of color, who together constitute less than 40% of the U.S. population, comprise more than 60% of all people killed by or who died in the custody of the police. By comparison, Whites, who constitute more than 60% of the population, comprise less than 40% of all deaths over the 2014-2021 period. Second, even the adjusted numbers likely understate the disparity, since significant numbers of Latinos, and likely many Asians as well, have “European” surnames not captured by the surname match. Both communities experience relatively high rates of intermarriage, the majority of which, especially between Asians and Whites, involve women of color. Their children may be identifiably Asian, Latino, or Indigenous, but those who have European surnames would not be identified by this analysis. Finally, in the absence of an official government database, additional research is required to produce a more accurate identification of Latinos and others not identified by existing datasets.

About UnidosUS

UnidosUS, previously known as NCLR (National Council of La Raza), is the nation’s largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos at the national and local levels.

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has united communities and different groups seeking common ground through collaboration, and that share a desire to make our country stronger. For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org, or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

Endnotes

- 1 The Raza Database Project is a network of some 50 researchers, scholars, journalists, activists, and family members of victims killed by police. Roberto “Dr. Cintli” Rodríguez, an author and former Associate Professor at the University of Arizona, is Project Director. Ivette Xochiyotl, a community-based advocate of Mental Health and Civil and Human Rights issues, serves as Project Manager. Richard Casillas, Joanna Laguna, Wendy Lujan, Maria Gomez Murphy, Alfred Porras, Dr. Paul Ruiz, and Valentina Zapata served as volunteer researchers. The analyses reported here were conducted by former Census Bureau Statistician Demographer Jesus M. García, CEO of La Cresta Demographics. These analyses represent initial findings from the Project, which intends to delve more deeply into these and other data to identify with greater precision and accuracy the actual number of Latinos killed by or in the custody of law enforcement. Other planned/ongoing efforts include: studies of local media reports, social media, testimonials from affected families, and other sources to address the misclassification of Latino deaths; carrying out similar analyses of people killed by or in the custody of U.S. Border Patrol or Immigration and Customs Enforcement; and deeper investigation of the reported causes of deaths by or in police custody. At UnidosUS, Senior Director of the Racial Equity Initiative Viviana López Green, Civil Rights Policy Analyst Claudia Ruiz, and Senior Cabinet Advisor Charles Kamasaki contributed to this Fact Sheet.
- 2 The terms “Hispanic” and “Latino” are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent. According to the technical definitions used by the Census, Latinos may be of any race. This document uses the sociological construct of “race” whereby, at least historically, most Latinos were treated as a distinct racial group, regardless of ethnicity. UnidosUS also occasionally refers to this population as “Latinx” to represent the diversity of gender identities and expressions that are present in the community
- 3 Roberto Rodríguez, “The Miscalculated of 2016 and False Media Narrative of Police Abuse,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, January 10, 2017, <https://diverseeducation.com/article/91022/>.
- 4 <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1280>.
- 5 Databases consulted by the Project include the following sources: *Washington Post*, “Fatal Force Report Police Shootings Database, 2015-2021,” <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/investigations/police-shootings-database/> (accessed May 20, 2021); *The Guardian*, “The Counted,” 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/series/counted-us-police-killings> (accessed May 20, 2021); *Fatal Encounters*, <https://fatalencounters.org/>; Killed By Police, “Police Shooting and Crime Database,” <https://robarguns.com/crime-and-police-shootings> (accessed May 20, 2021); Ana Srikanth, “National Database on Police Killings Tracked 1,127 Deaths Last Year,” *The Hill*, March 17, 2021, <https://thehill.com/changing-america/respect/equality/543712-national-database-on-police-killings-tracked-1127-police> (accessed May 20, 2021); *Mapping Police Violence*, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>; Terry J. Wilson II, “Police Killings: United States of America 1/01/2000-5/26/2020,” https://services3.arcgis.com/ZOm3lyRvRxR6535t/arcgis/rest/services/FATAL_ENCOUNTERS_DOT_ORG_SPREADSHEET_Form_Responses/FeatureServer/0 (accessed May 20, 2021); Whitney Kotlewski, “People for the People Official Election Toolkit,” https://services9.arcgis.com/q5uyFFTZo3LFL04P/arcgis/rest/services/Fatal_Police_Killings/FeatureServer/0 (accessed May 20, 2021); and “US Police Killings 2013 to 2019,” https://services9.arcgis.com/uPQyVUNozQtWbtrl/arcgis/rest/services/US_Police_Killings_2013_to_2019/FeatureServer (accessed May 20, 2021). Notwithstanding their limitations, the Raza Database Project and UnidosUS commend these entities for their work to help Americans gain a better understanding of the scope and severity of police killings/deaths in the custody of law enforcement in the United States.
- 6 A small number of duplicates likely remain, attributable to misspellings of names in one or more databases or uses of different names for the same person. For example, the use of different names occasionally occurs with some Asians for whom English translations may reverse first names and surnames, or with some people of Hispanic descent who may be identified with maternal (i.e., *apellido materno*) in addition to paternal surnames in a database. Other factors, such as inconsistencies in a victim’s age or date of death among datasets, may result in the same person being counted more than once.

- 7 The “Middle Eastern” category is only rarely used or reported, and researchers believe these data are unreliable; they are included herein to maintain fidelity with the design of the databases listed above.
- 8 See *Washington Post*, Police Shootings Database 2015-2021.
- 9 U.S. Census Bureau, *Frequently Occurring Surnames in the 2010 Census, 2010 Decennial Census of Population and Housing: Surnames*, 2016, <https://api.census.gov/data/2010/surname.html>; https://www.census.gov/topics/population/genealogy/data/2010_surnames.html. These datasets contain over 150,000 spellings of surnames that occurred 100 times or more in the decennial Census records, including surnames of people of Hispanic/Latino descent, non-Hispanic American Indian and Alaska Native, non-Hispanic Asian and Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander, and non-Hispanic Black or African American. See also David L. Word and R. Colby Perkins, Jr., “Building a Spanish Surname List for the 1990’s—A New Approach to an Old Problem,” U.S. Census Bureau, March 1996, <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/working-papers/1996/demo/POP-twps0013.pdf>; D. E. Knuth, SOUNDEX Function, *The Art of Computer Programming, Volume 3, Sorting and Searching* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973); U.S. Census Bureau, “Census API: Datasets in /data/2010/surname and its descendants,” accessed May 25, 2021, <https://api.census.gov/data/2010/surname.html>; and Joshua Comenetz, “Frequently Occurring Surnames in the 2010 Census.”
- 10 The “Middle Eastern” category is only rarely used or reported, and researchers believe these data are unreliable; they are included herein to maintain fidelity with the design of the databases listed above.
- 11 The phenomenon of “surname clustering” makes the use of surname as a proxy for race/ethnicity far more accurate than might be assumed at first glance; see U.S. Bureau of the Census, “What’s in a Name?,” December 15, 2016, https://www.census.gov/newsroom/blogs/random-samplings/2016/12/what_s_in_a_name.html. Nevertheless, there are many non-Hispanics, e.g., from the Philippines, who have Spanish surnames, which may lead to an over-counting of Latinos based on surname matching alone. However, there are also many people of Mexican origin with “Anglo” surnames; European surnames occur frequently among people from Panama, Puerto Rico, and other areas with a long-standing U.S. presence, and German and Italian surnames are especially common among people with origins in Chile and Argentina. In the United States, most of these individuals would likely view themselves as Latino or Hispanic. The researchers believe that, in sum, the latter outnumber the former, such that if anything, the adjusted data in Table 2 and Appendix II likely still significantly under-reports the actual number of Latinos killed by or who die in the custody of the police.
- 12 UnidosUS believes that the apparent drop in Black/African American deaths reported in Table 2 is attributable to a technical and definitional issue, not to any over-reporting of Black deaths in existing databases. Technically, the researchers used the standard Census definition of “Black, non-Hispanic” in conducting the analyses. UnidosUS believes that the reduction of 461 Black deaths is entirely attributable to “Afro-Latinos,” who legitimately should be included in both the Black/African American *and* Hispanic Latino categories.

Appendix I: Aggregated, Unadjusted Count*

Deaths in Presence of/Killings by Police

By Race/Ethnicity 2000–May 9, 2021

YEAR	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY							
		Latino	NL-Asian/Pac Isld	NL-Black	NL-Middle East	NL-Native Amer	NL-White	Other-Unknown	Unknown
All	32,542	4,333	480	7,425	51	326	11,571	8,229	127
2000	859	56	12	122	-	13	125	531	-
2001	942	76	15	95	3	3	127	623	-
2002	1,011	97	12	133	1	6	147	615	-
2003	1,128	123	18	213	-	12	239	523	-
2004	1,105	146	17	193	-	6	265	478	-
2005	1,211	150	21	234	5	13	327	461	-
2006	1,318	167	19	271	1	13	358	489	-
2007	1,292	169	13	272	2	9	368	459	-
2008	1,236	165	15	262	3	9	334	448	-
2009	1,285	176	23	276	1	9	387	413	-
2010	1,302	155	19	301	4	15	461	347	-
2011	1,424	193	22	365	-	10	522	312	-
2012	1,477	215	23	420	1	17	565	236	-
2013	1,867	306	34	502	3	13	810	199	-
2014	1,869	322	31	492	2	20	854	148	-
2015	2,149	309	30	550	7	26	1,077	144	6
2016	1,998	268	27	511	3	29	989	163	8
2017	2,075	314	20	521	6	33	930	234	17
2018	2,108	325	35	504	1	29	883	307	24
2019	2,073	276	40	536	4	19	819	357	22
2020	2,134	267	23	507	4	17	766	529	21
2021	679	58	11	145	-	5	218	213	29

* NL= Non-Latino

Appendix II: Aggregated Adjusted Count*

Deaths in Presence of/Killings by Police

By Race/Ethnicity, 2000–May 9, 2021

YEAR	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY								
		Latino	NL-Asian/ Pac Islid	NL- Black	NL- Middle East	NL- Native Amer	NL- Other	NL- White	Other- Unknown	Unknown
		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
All	32,542	5,671	3,057	6,620	27	528	5	10,384	6,142	108
2000	859	117	79	121	-	22	-	111	409	-
2001	942	144	98	83	2	14	-	110	491	-
2002	1,011	178	96	121	1	11	-	130	474	-
2003	1,128	186	91	209	-	17	-	218	407	-
2004	1,105	216	109	175	-	13	-	240	352	-
2005	1,211	218	104	217	3	19	1	297	352	-
2006	1,318	242	120	241	-	20	-	328	367	-
2007	1,292	220	117	244	1	23	-	336	351	-
2008	1,236	216	114	241	2	15	-	300	348	-
2009	1,285	229	137	239	1	13	-	350	316	-
2010	1,302	219	110	278	3	26	1	411	254	-
2011	1,424	243	131	319	-	16	-	466	249	-
2012	1,477	265	144	374	-	26	-	488	180	-
2013	1,867	325	180	453	1	21	-	728	159	-
2014	1,869	343	194	431	1	25	2	760	113	-
2015	2,149	346	170	491	1	39	-	992	104	6
2016	1,998	311	182	438	2	41	-	905	112	7
2017	2,075	388	187	456	3	45	-	837	148	11
2018	2,108	411	181	434	1	52	1	784	222	22
2019	2,073	342	233	465	2	33	-	729	248	21
2020	2,134	406	195	456	3	28	-	675	353	18
2021	679	106	85	134	-	9	-	189	133	23

* NL= Non-Latino

Appendix III: Aggregated Count*

Causes of Death Reported in National Databases

By Race/Ethnicity, 2014–May 9, 2021

All										
YEAR	TOTAL	RACE/ETHNICITY								
		Latino	NL-Asian/ Pac Isld	NL-Black	NL-Middle East	NL-Native Amer	NL-Other	NL-White	Other-Unknown	Unknown
		-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
All	32,542	5,671	3,057	6,620	27	528	5	10,384	6,142	108
CAUSE OF DEATH										
Beaten	194	46	16	52	1	3	-	44	32	-
Burned/ Smoke Inhalation	42	5	6	3	-	-	-	13	15	-
Drowned	203	32	15	46	-	4	-	47	59	-
Fell from a height	69	18	3	9	-	1	-	20	18	-
Gunshot	23,664	4,146	2,209	4,725	22	415	1	8,065	3,973	108
Medical Emergency	576	101	51	170	-	7	-	148	99	-
Other/ Undetermined	167	39	14	47	-	6	-	39	22	-
Pepper Spray	40	5	4	12	-	-	-	7	12	-
Physical Restraint	325	61	27	99	1	2	-	82	53	-
Stabbed	50	17	3	4	-	-	-	12	14	-
Taser	1,008	174	75	304	-	14	-	279	162	-
Unknown	4	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	2	-
Vehicle	6,200	1,026	634	1,149	3	76	4	1,627	1,681	-

* NL= Non-Latino