

Some 1,900 People Died Under Police Custody: Report

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Arrest-related deaths also include intentionally killings by police, which account for almost two-thirds of the total number.

A new report by the United States Bureau of Justice Statistics has found that around 1,900 people were killed as they were being arrested in 2015, with two-thirds of that number being intentionally murdered by law enforcement authorities.

Arrest-related deaths (ARD), as its name suggests, and according to the Bureau, can happen anytime between the detention of a person to their potential death during lock-up. The report found that about 64 percent of those deaths were described as homicides, which includes murder in self-defense and otherwise. Another 18 percent were suicides, and 11 percent were ruled accidents.

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Though the ARD program began in 2003, it was a response to an earlier Death in Custody Reporting Act of 2000, designed to document the deaths that occur while under police custody or while avoiding it. The recent spikes in police-brutality cases also demanded closer inspection.

“Information on the circumstances surrounding all manners of arrest-related deaths—including homicides, suicides, accidents, and deaths due to natural causes—may inform law enforcement training and policies,” the report states.

Indeed, cases such as Sandra Bland’s, who died while in custody in July 2015 after being pulled over for a broken taillight, require that such statistics be made available, particularly as her family has contested the decision to rule her death a suicide. Freddie Gray also died in the back of a police van months earlier, in April, after suffering severe neck injuries while shackled and handcuffed but not strapped to the vehicle.

The report used data from June, July and August 2015 and identified around 379 ARDs during that time frame. However, after contacting law enforcement agencies and consulting with media reports, the Bureau found the number was actually closer to 425 deaths during that same period, which constitutes a 12 percent difference.

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Studying media reviews as well as voluntary reports from law enforcement agencies led the Bureau to declare some 1,348 potential ARDs from June 1, 2015 to March 31, 2016. Accounting for the 12 percent difference after consulting media reports, the Bureau concluded the number was probably closer to 1,900.

That number may rise, however, since the ARD program has been redesigned to also include surveys of law enforcement agencies and medical examiners' offices that did not have a potential arrest-related deaths identified by the media.

The figures differ by state and region, with the rate of potential ARD deaths reaching 1.5 to 3.5 deaths per 1 million in the Northeast. On the other side in the Northwest, the numbers rise to 5.8 to 13.7 deaths in one year.

The figures don't account for demographic differences, though medical examiners did request the information. The Bureau has also stated its intention to begin collecting that data as well in upcoming reports.